

**INTEREST OF THE SERBS FROM KOSOVO
in the process of normalization of relation
between Belgrade and Pristina**



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

F2F	– Face to face
SAP	– Socialist Autonomous Province
ICTY	– International criminal tribunal for the former Yugoslavia
RTS	– Radio televizija Srbije
EU	– European union
NATO	– North atlantic treaty organization
UN	– United nations
NGO	– Non governmental sector
CASA	– Center for affirmative social action
UNHCR	– United nations high commissioner for refugees
USA	– United states of america
ASM ZSO	– Association of serbian municipalities
OSCE	– Organization for security and cooperation
RTK	– Radio televizija Kosova
KFOR	– Kosovo force
KSF	– Kosovo security force
EULEX	– European union rule of law
RPD	– Regional police directorate
KBS	Kosovo Security Forces
SBUN	United Nations Security Council
InTER	Institute for Territorial Economic Development
SPC	Serbian Orthodox Church

Methodology and Design of Quantitative Research

A field survey¹ using face-to-face interviews was conducted from April 29th to May 16th, 2023, with a targeted sample of 800 respondents, adult citizens of Serbian nationality across Kosovo. A total of 587 respondents were validated and processed.

Data Collection Approach in the Field: Face-to-face interviews based on quota (intentional sampling) distributed according to place of residence, gender, education, and employment status

Type: Pen-and-paper

Research Instrument: A questionnaire consisting of 11 questions with predefined answer options related to the national interests of Serbs in Kosovo and the prerequisites for their fulfillment, approaches to securing those interests, and assessments of the policies of Belgrade and Pristina towards Serbs in Kosovo.

Sample Structure:

- ◆ Place of residence: 55.40% of respondents are from the north, and 44.60% from the south of Kosovo;
- ◆ Gender: 47.40% are women, and 52.60% are men;
- ◆ Education: 1.4% of respondents have completed primary school, 41.40% have completed secondary school, and 57.60% have completed higher education or university;
- ◆ Employment: Out of the total respondents, 60.10% are employed, while 34.9% are unemployed or retired, and 4.9% are students.

Confidence Interval: +/- 4.1%

It's important to note that, given the lack of official statistical data on the demographic structure of the Serbian population in Kosovo, we can only conditionally speak about the representativeness of the sample.

Methodology and Design of Qualitative Research

Qualitative research was conducted from March 29th to August 20th, 2023, through face-to-face interviews. A total of 58 citizens of Serbian nationality were interviewed on the territory of Kosovo. The criterion for selecting participants was their relevance and contribution to their field of expertise (civil sector, education, economy, media, politics, legal studies, etc.). Participants had the right to provide answers under the condition of anonymity.

According to methodological guidelines, interviews were organized during the research process based on the authors' assessment of needs or upon obtaining results from the statistical study. The number of interviewed participants for different thematic areas ranged from 4 to 8 individuals. The number of interviewed participants involved in establishing the basic research theses (defining national interests), as well as the question of autonomy for the Serbian community, was 30 individuals with diverse professional backgrounds.

¹ 80 respondents were surveyed using Google Forms, while the remainder were surveyed through face-to-face field interviews (f2f).



1. The Genesis of the Serbian National Interest in Kosovo

1.1 Political Articulation of the National Aspirations

The Serbian national interest in Kosovo has a very specific and complex genesis. The evolutionary trajectory, predominantly shaped by decision-makers and the intellectual elite, is charted based on a blend of historical, socio-political, and ideological circumstances. Determining the Serbian national interest proves to be a challenging task, as it is far from static; rather, it constitutes an ongoing political process that, intertwined with geopolitical trends and internal conflicting viewpoints, continuously explores its pragmatic, attainable, and purposeful objectives. From a cultural standpoint, the Serbian national interest takes shape in terms of values and emotions through the lens of the "Kosovo myth," an integral component of the Serbian national identity. Over an extended period, the Kosovo myth found expression primarily through folklore, literature, and various forms of artistic creation². Its political articulation first emerged during the 19th century within the realm of romanticism, evolving into a foundational motif for the political and cultural unification of the Serbian nation. Through a fusion of cultural, historical, and political motives, this myth evolved into an aspiration of the Serbs to reclaim control over Kosovo's territory. This motivating factor has persisted in diverse forms of manifestation up to the present day, serving as a fundamental reflex in the quest to identify the national interest concerning Kosovo.

In modern history, the need to define the Serbian national interest in Kosovo arose in the 1960s, alongside the demand for expanding the autonomous powers of the province of Kosovo within the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. The aspirations of Albanian communist leaders led to a constitutional reform in 1971, which extended the authority of autonomous provinces at the expense of the original republics. This transformation resulted in the provinces becoming constituents of the Federation, and Yugoslavia evolving into a union of united nations, their socialist republics, and socialist autonomous provinces. The equalization of provinces with federal units faced strong criticism within Serbian intellectual circles, who saw the newly acquired jurisdiction of Kosovo as a risk of separatism. Consequently, voices advocating the need to define the Serbian interest in Kosovo soon and inevitably emerged in the political discourse³.

The initial step in problematizing the Serbian national interest among intellectuals is attributed to Dobrica Ćosić, who, in his speech at the 14th Plenum of the Central Committee of the League of Communists of Serbia in 1968, criticized Albanian national tendencies and the strengthening of autonomous powers for Kosovo and Vojvodina⁴ from the standpoint of Marxist internationalism. This positioned Ćosić as a Serbian intellectual who not only nominated the question of the Serbian national interest within former Yugoslavia but also directly associated that interest with the Kosovo issue⁵.

² Malkolm, N. (1998). *Kosovo: A Short History*. New York: NYU Press

³ From the Memorandum Draft : "An overly broad and institutionally firmly grounded autonomous province creates two new divisions within the Serbian nation. It is true that autonomist and separatist forces insisted on expanding autonomy, but they would have found it difficult to achieve this without receiving moral and political support from republics where separatist tendencies had not disappeared. The expansion of autonomy was justified by assurances that it would lead to greater equality between nations and better management of public affairs. The events in Kosovo in the late 1960s served as a warning of what could happen if autonomy were increased." Retrieved from: <https://www.helsinki.org.rs/serbian/doc/memorandum%20sanu.pdf>

⁴ Cohen, L. & Dragović-Soso, J. (2007). *State Collapse in South-Eastern Europe: New Perspectives on Yugoslavia's Disintegration*. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press

⁵ Ristanović, P. (2012). Dobrica Ćosić and the Opening of the Kosovo Issue in 1968. *Baština*, 33, 197–230. Retrieved from: <https://scindeks-clanci.ceon.rs/data/pdf/0353-9008/2012/0353-90081233197R.pdf>

1.2 Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts

The 1974 Constitution granted Kosovo the right to establish its constitution, resulting in a significant transformation of the socio-political landscape within Kosovo society. Through the implementation of the principle of "ethnic representation," Kosovo Albanians gained prominence in various social sectors, and a substantial number of individuals from the Albanian community assumed leadership positions. This emphasis on ethnic identity in accessing societal resources inevitably exacerbated ethnic tensions in Kosovo, ultimately leading to the emigration of a notable number of Kosovo Serbs⁶. In response to the escalating tensions in Kosovo, the Serbian political and intellectual elite began openly discussing the risk of the potential secession of Kosovo, considering its recognition as an equal federal entity. These concerns were encapsulated in the well-known "Memorandum" of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts in 1986, which, although never officially adopted, became the leading ideological framework defining the "Serbian national interest" in Kosovo. The main issue highlighted in the document was the continuous migration of Serbs from Kosovo caused by the strengthening of Albanian separatist aspirations and the deepening ethnic conflict as its consequence, along with the interest to halt this process and "create permanent conditions for the return of the displaced people." This Memorandum sparked significant social debate in 1986, suggesting that Kosovo Serbs and Serbia were victims of the Constitution of 1974, which separated the autonomous provinces from the core state, as well as victims of the historical aspirations of Kosovo Albanians defined in the programs of the League of Prizren (1878–81)⁷. As a result, the Memorandum delineated the main ideological tenets of the "Kosovo narratives," deeply rooted in Serbian political thought to this day. For example, more than two decades after the Memorandum, during the initiation of an "internal dialogue" on possible solutions to the Kosovo issue in 2017, President Vučić also invoked the League of Prizren as a primary source of threat to Serbian national interest, characterizing Albanian aspirations for independence as its negation⁸.

Social and political pressure within Serbian society to significantly derogate the autonomy granted to Kosovo resulted in concrete institutional steps during the turbulent period of the late 1980s and early 1990s. The leadership of Kosovo experienced multiple shifts in a series of waves followed by the decision of the Assembly of the Socialist Autonomous Province of Kosovo (SAP Kosovo) in 1989 to adopt amendments to the Constitution of Serbia, thereby abolishing the special status that the province had enjoyed. The autonomous province lost its veto power over constitutional changes, while the powers of the provincial parliament were reduced. This marked the beginning of the "modern era" of the Serbian-Albanian conflict in Kosovo, characterized by institutional parallelism, escalating ethnic tensions, and the onset of armed confrontation between Serbs and Albanians. The crisis resulted in international intervention, with the bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999 after unsuccessful negotiations in Rambouillet, and it ended with the signing of the "Military-Technical Agreement" in Kumanovo. This agreement served as the basis for

⁶ According to estimates by The New York Times, during the 1970s, due to job loss, sporadic attacks on Serbian cultural heritage, and a hostile environment towards non-Albanian populations, approximately 57,000 Serbs left Kosovo. More specifically, from 1961 to 1980, 92,197 Serbs and 20,424 Montenegrins left Kosovo, and from June 1981 to June 1988, an additional 28,000 left. In this manner, while in 1961 Serbs and Montenegrins constituted around 27% of the population, by 1981, their representation had dwindled to only 15%. Source: Grupković, D. (1988). Comparative overview of census results from 1921–1981. Belgrade: Federal Statistical Office. Brunborg, H. (2002). Report on the size and ethnic composition of the population of Kosovo. ICTY, Oslo.

⁷ Budding, A. H. (1998). Systemic Crisis and National Mobilization: The Case of the "Memorandum of the Serbian Academy." *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, 22, 49–69. Retrieved from: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41036730>

⁸ "Since 1878, from the formation of the so-called Prizren League, we Serbs have not been willing to be responsible enough to understand the strength and desires of Albanians. Due to the Albanian mistake, a significant one, and I thank them for it, I consider their misunderstanding of Serbian state and national interests, and their underestimation, or even worse, the attempt to sweep them under the rug because someone believes that with the support of certain great powers, this is possible," Vučić emphasized in an interview for RTS. Retrieved from: <https://radiomitrovicasever.com/2017/09/26/vucic-da-je-kosovo-izgublje-no-ne-bih-se-za-njega-toliko-borio/>

United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244, which entailed the withdrawal of Serbian security forces from the territory of Kosovo. At the time, it resulted in a temporary loss of Serbia's sovereignty over that part of the territory, but as time passed, this loss proved to be permanent.

With the loss of sovereignty and the withdrawal of the armed forces of the Republic of Serbia from Kosovo, around 225,000 Kosovo Serbs have left as well. The compromised security, ethnically motivated violence, and institutional deficiencies in ensuring the rights of the Serbian community in Kosovo⁹ create enduring negative migration tendencies for Kosovo Serbs. These tendencies persist to this day, with varying degrees of intensity¹⁰.

1.3 Serbia's Position in the Post-Conflict Period

During this post-conflict period in Kosovo, the Serbian national interest has evolved to primarily encompass passive policies centered around contesting the international legal standing of Kosovo and providing ongoing support to the Serbian community within Kosovo. This context has led to the reemergence of institutional parallelism, now involving the isolated Serbian community. Given that the foundation of the socio-political order in post-conflict Kosovo was the United Nations Security Council Resolution, which formally treats Kosovo as an integral part of the former Yugoslavia, the engaged diplomacies of Western countries continue with diplomatic initiatives aimed at achieving internationally recognized independence for Kosovo.

A notable initiative to reach a compromise regarding Kosovo's status was the international diplomatic initiative led by Finnish diplomat Martti Ahtisaari, famously referred to as the "Ahtisaari Plan." Officially titled the "Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement," this plan outlines a concept of "supervised independence" for Kosovo and wide-ranging autonomy for Kosovo Serbs, including the creation of new municipalities in areas where Serbs are a majority, ensuring significant self-governance in healthcare, education, and social issues, as well as the official use of the Serbian language throughout Kosovo. The plan also envisages the possibility of association among Serbs in Kosovo, including financing from Belgrade.

However, authorities in Belgrade rejects this proposal because, despite containing certain affirmative solutions for the status of the Serbian community, it fundamentally represents a form of de facto recognition of Kosovo's independence. This stance was politically formalized through the Resolution on the Protection of Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity, and Constitutional Order, adopted by the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia. Nevertheless, this did not prevent Kosovo Albanians from adopting the "Declaration of Independence" in February 2008, subsequently leading to Kosovo being recognized as an international legal state by the United States, United Kingdom and the majority of EU countries, including prominent EU members such as Germany and France.

Two strategies on how to resolve the permanent status of Kosovo have dominated the political life of Serbia after the declaration of Kosovo's independence.

⁹ By cross-referencing data from relevant sources, a figure of 225,000 Kosovo Serbs who left Kosovo after the war has been obtained. Retrieved from:

<https://www.amnesty.org/fr/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/eur700042007en.pdf>

<https://www.unhcr.org/3ba0bbeb4.pdf>

https://kirs.gov.rs/media/uploads/Migracije/O-migracijama/Strategija_odrzivog_opstanka_i_povratka_na_KiM.pdf

¹⁰ Numerous documented cases testify to the endangered security of the Serbian community in Kosovo, often without satisfactory legal resolutions. This can be observed in reports from Human Rights Watch and other relevant sources. Retrieved from:

<https://www.hrw.org/reports/1999/kosov2/>

<https://www.hrw.org/report/2004/07/25/failure-protect/anti-minority-violence-kosovo-march-2004>

<https://www.kim.gov.rs/incidenti-kim.php>

The first strategy revolves around maintaining an "active" frozen conflict or status quo until more favorable geopolitical opportunities arise, potentially pressuring authorities in Pristina into compromise with Belgrade. Such an approach involves providing institutional support to Kosovo Serbs resisting integration into the Kosovo constitutional and legal system. It also includes active efforts to prevent Kosovo's integration into international institutions, and expansion of the number of countries recognizing Kosovo – particularly the remaining five European Union members and four NATO member states. The essence of this strategy lies in preserving the hypothetical legal perspective of Kosovo's reintegration into Serbia's constitutional and legal framework. Within these parameters, legal and diplomatic solutions were sought, including the idea of enacting a constitutional law on "substantial autonomy," which never materialized beyond the working version and the so-called "4-point plan" promoted by the former President of the Republic of Serbia, Boris Tadić. This plan implied the concept of creating a "state within a state" – with Kosovo enjoying complete independence concerning Serbian state institutions while maintaining the hypothetical possibility for the reintegration of Albanians in the longer term. The contours of this passive strategic approach in addressing the Kosovo issue can also be observed in the negotiation process under the auspices of the European Union, known as the Brussels Dialogue. In these negotiations, formalism and symbolism of Kosovo's sovereignty were presented as red lines, while occasional concessions that fundamentally expanded the sovereignty's jurisdiction to the previously "unyielding north of Kosovo" were camouflaged through creative interpretations of "constructive ambiguity" or aggressive media campaigns.

The second dominant strategy is based on idea of partition, territorial exchange, or division along ethnic lines. The idea of partition that Prime Minister Đinđić offered as a possible final solution to Serbian-Albanian relations was based on the belief that Kosovo is inevitably moving towards irreversible independence over time, and taking into account a strong historical constant of Serbia's failure to integrate Albanians. Through the document "Strategy for Kosovo and Metohija," Đinđić formulated the idea of the constitutiveness of the Serbian community, thereby protecting its role as a political actor in Kosovo. In a letter sent to the Prime Minister of Great Britain in February 2003, he outlined the first option for Kosovo as being "more than a province, less than a federal unit," with the right to secession in the future. The second option was the Cypriot demarcation model, but without changing borders. Finally, the third option presented was a "border change by agreement," with the conclusion: "We should be brave enough to confront the most dramatic option – the third one." Fifteen years later, President Vučić publicly declared his support for the idea of "partition" with the Albanians, without specifying the partition line, while noting that "we have a territory for which it is unclear how it is treated and whom it belongs – this is always a source of potential conflicts and problems."

The proposals for partition were presented under the premise that disputed borders are a source of uncertainty and potential conflicts in the future. At the same time, the delineation would imply a concrete solution for the Kosovo Albanians, with Serbia accepting a "diminished" Kosovo as an independent state. The idea of territory exchange, although a plan with strategic contours, fundamentally failed to transcend the bounds of political party platform and gain broader societal support. Criticisms from opposition political parties, especially those with distinct national programs, were not isolated. Individuals from academic and intellectual circles opposed the plan, and the Serbian Orthodox Church rejected it as unacceptable.

¹¹ Zoran Živković: The Brussels Agreement is an act of recognition of Kosovo by the Vučić regime and nothing else. (April 19, 2023). Novi Magazin. Retrieved from: <https://novimagazin.rs/vesti/294181-zoran-zivkovic-briselski-sporazum-je-akt-priznanja-kosova-od-strane-rezima-vucica-i-nista-drugo>

However, the fiercest resistance primarily came from individuals within the Serbian community in Kosovo— independent political representatives, and civil society activists, particularly those residing in municipalities south of the Ibar River, speculated to be the agreed delineation line. The main arguments against the Serbian Government's approach were centered on the uncertain fate of the Serbian community in areas beyond the envisioned delineation line and the resultant loss of their affirmative rights, which would carry existential risks. On the other hand, political representatives of the Serbian community in Kosovo from the leading political option, the "Srpska Lista, including those representing the community south of the Ibar, lent their support to this plan, thereby demonstrating high party discipline against the interests of its constituency. The idea generated controversy and deepened social divisions within Serbian society, coupled with active measures of "silencing" critical viewpoints by the authorities in Belgrade. Further societal polarization was halted by the rejection of the plan by key EU diplomacies, primarily Germany and UK (at that time still a member), due to concerns over its potential impact on regional stability in the Western Balkans. Nonetheless, the plan remains notable not only as the sole specifically defined political platform of the ruling party in Belgrade but also as one of the rare approaches to Kosovo's issue that gained the support of political representatives (in power) both in Belgrade and Pristina. Such a precedent in relations between Serbs and Albanians imbues a certain "magnetism" to this plan, thereby maintaining its consideration in international discourse related to Kosovo, particularly during crises that entail on-the-ground violence escalation.

1.4 Conflicting Interests: European integration and the Status of Kosovo

European integration and Serbia's membership in the European Union are among the main strategic directions and national interests of the Republic of Serbia following the democratic changes of 2000. The accession process was embraced as a framework for internal reforms, with European standards serving as a societal ideal that various governments, to a lesser or greater extent, aspired to since the fall of Milošević. The recognition of Kosovo's independence by leading EU member states raises the question of Serbia's stance on the Kosovo issue in the context of fulfilling the conditions for EU accession. In particular, the European Union, by opening Chapter 35 in December 2015, formalized the link between the normalization of relations with Pristina and Serbia's EU accession process. The EU's common position for Chapter 35¹² states that "Serbia's progress in the accession negotiations will be guided by Serbia's progress in the accession preparation process, which will be measured particularly in terms of Serbia's continuous commitment to a visible and sustainable improvement of relations with Kosovo."

In this context, Serbia finds itself in an unenviable position on its European path, where two of the most crucial concepts of national interests are in direct conflict: the accession to the European Union and the preservation of Kosovo within Serbia's constitutional framework. This directly leads to a weakening of support for the idea of EU accession in Serbia and places political leaders in the uncomfortable position of "balancing" between two political ideas that are, according to the EU's position, mutually exclusive. This incompatibility of the core Serbian national interest concepts is particularly evident in the negotiation position of the Republic of Serbia within the framework of the Brussels Dialogue, the main political process for the normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo. Facing intense pressure from the EU on one

¹² EU Common Position, National Convention on Chapter 35. Retrieved from: https://eukonvent.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/pg_20_eu_pozicije.pdf

Serbian government shifted its focus to the "formalism" of the achieved agreements. It attempts to negotiate solutions that essentially entail the concessions sought by the „West“ while simultaneously bearing the potential to be portrayed in domestic media as diplomatic successes in line with the prevailing perceptions of Serbian national interest. Naturally, this dissonance between reality and fabricated public interpretations has had its consequences. It raised the expectations among the population, especially in northern Kosovo, that the achieved solutions would maintain Serbia's presence and influence on the ground and bring compromises that limit Pristina's attributes of sovereignty over this part of Kosovo. As the implementation of the agreed-upon settlements demonstrated the unrealistic nature of these expectations, dissatisfaction among the citizens on the ground grew. It escalated into open protests after a series of unilateral actions by the government in Pristina conducted outside the negotiation process. Amidst the rising risks of regional instability due to the Ukraine conflict, the international community heightened its pressure on the negotiating parties to address the Kosovo issue. This push is evident in the introduction of the "Franco-German plan," and efforts to secure the initial agreement of this proposal from both sides engaged in the negotiations¹³.

While this plan reaffirms the solutions reached within the framework of the Brussels Agreement, it essentially signifies the creation of a new negotiating framework for Kosovo and Serbia. From Serbia's negotiating standpoint, which includes certain informally articulated elements of national interest, this plan holds advantages. It doesn't require formal recognition of Kosovo's independence by Serbia and assumes a certain level of autonomy for the Serbian community, allowing it to maintain institutional ties with Serbia¹⁴. Similarly, the plan doesn't aspire to grant Kosovo formal membership in the UN. However, this is the result of an assessment that Kosovo's integration into the United Nations is not linked to Serbia's stance on Kosovo's independence. Instead, it rests with the permanent members of the UN Security Council, namely Russia, and China, which are unlikely to accept such a step at this moment. Nevertheless, this element of the agreement is another one presented to the Serbian public as an affirmative part of the plan in line with the national interest of the Republic of Serbia¹⁵. On the other hand, the Franco-German plan, or more recently, the EU Plan for Kosovo, includes elements that de facto foresee recognition of certain sovereign competencies of Pristina by the Republic of Serbia. It also imposes an obligation on Serbia to refrain from challenging the international legal subjectivity of Kosovo. As we explained earlier, this has been an integral part of the policy of the Republic of Serbia towards Kosovo for many years. Thus, Article 4 states that neither party can represent the other in the international sphere or act on its behalf, emphasizing that "Serbia will not oppose Kosovo's membership in any international organization." Therefore, whether it entails formal recognition or not, this text of the agreement undoubtedly requires Belgrade to accept Kosovo as a separate political entity functioning independently from the state of Serbia, including representation in international frameworks. Despite announcements of swift implementation of the agreement, the escalation of the crisis in northern Kosovo halts further negotiations regarding the European proposal, shifting the focus of the international community towards the de-escalation of the crisis. At the time this report is being drafted, there are no indications of when the negotiating parties will resume discussions on its implementation.

1.5 The conclusions

The concise overview of the evolution of the Serbian interest in Kosovo underscores several fundamental characteristics that hold significance and impact the ongoing issues between Serbs and Albanians. The initial observation is that the notion of the Serbian national interest in Kosovo has never been formally established as a strate-

¹³ Agreed Implementation of the European Agreement for Serbia and Kosovo. (March 19, 2023). Radio Free Europe. Retrieved from: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/32323150.html>

¹⁴ What Vučić thinks about the Franco-German plan for Kosovo. (March 2, 2023). Blic. Retrieved from: <https://www.blic.rs/vesti/politika/sta-vucic-misli-o-francusko-nemaackom-planu-za-kosovo/62wekbb>

¹⁵ Ibid.

strategic framework that guides the long-term actions of state institutions. Instead, it exists as a political stance rather than a comprehensive political strategy that emerged as a product of broader societal discussions and consensus that shaped enduring state policies (irrespective of changes in government). In the absence of such a framework, the Serbian national interest in Kosovo is channeled through political party agendas, often merging interests that may not necessarily be directly related to the Kosovo issue (political considerations, personal motives, the struggle for political power, etc.). Consequently, this leads to inconsistencies in Serbia's policies towards Kosovo, which tend to shift with changes in ruling structures, giving rise to political improvisation and populism. The concept of the national interest in Kosovo within the context of modern Serbian parliamentary practices has been narrowed down to the confines of individual party interests and internal power struggles. The consequences of such an approach are evident in daily occurrences¹⁶.

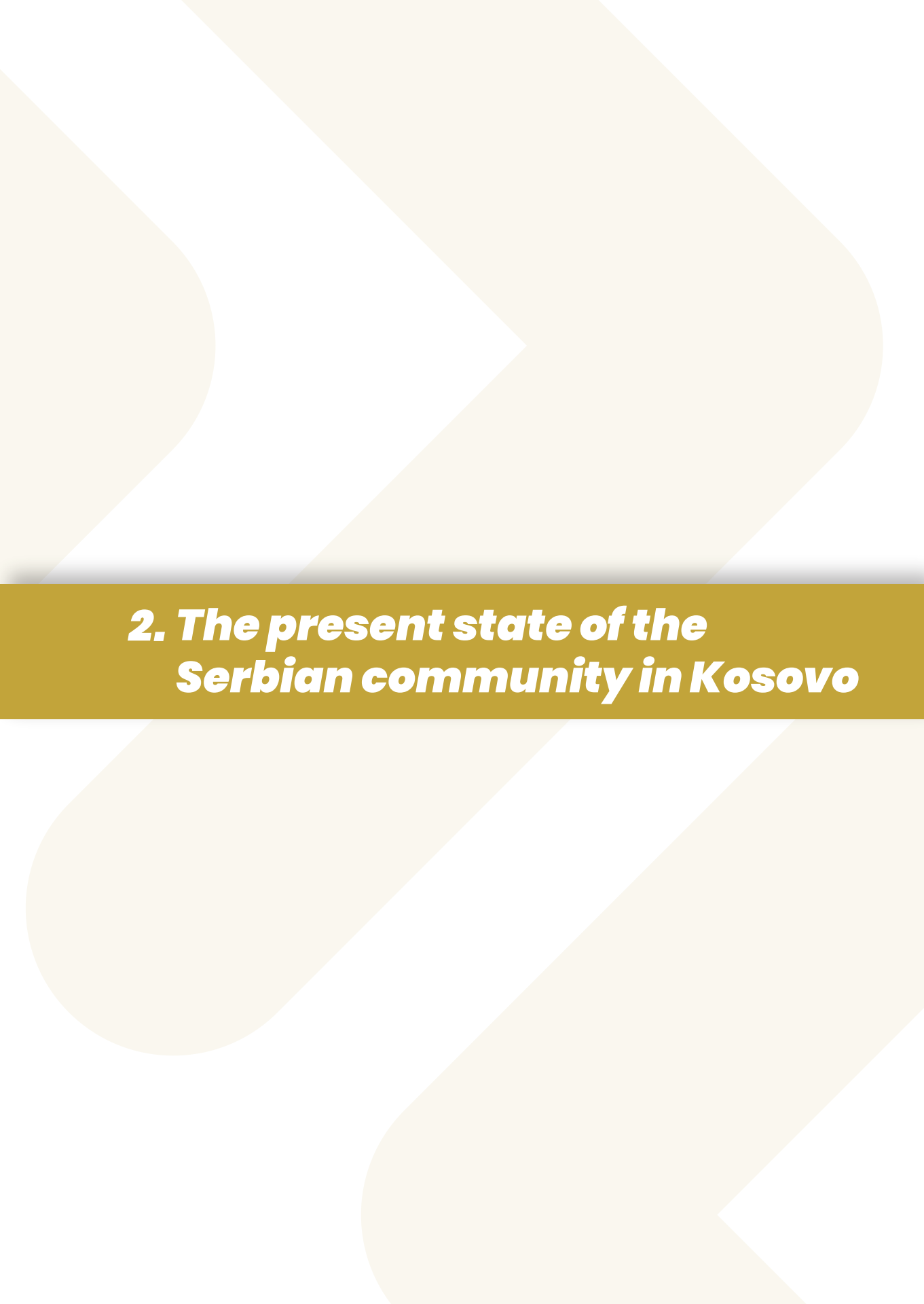
Another key characteristic of the prevailing concepts of Serbian national interests is its exclusive definition through an ethnic conflict with the Albanians. The rationale for this is clear, given that the modern historical interactions between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo have largely been marked by conflict. Additionally, the necessity to define the Serbian interest in Kosovo in the contemporary era emerged during the struggle for ethnic dominance within socialist Yugoslavia in the 1960s. Following its dissolution, this need evolved to encompass questions about Kosovo's status framework. As such, the need shapes the nature of this definition.

This kind of conceptual rigidity has hindered its progression into more liberal forms. For instance, the notion that the interests of the Serbian community could be realized through peaceful coexistence with Kosovo's Albanian population has not been widely embraced. A similar visionary approach is notably absent in the prevailing perspectives of Kosovo Albanians. Even today, within their nationalist circles, the concept of an "ethnically pure Kosovo"¹⁷ persists, despite Kosovo having achieved de facto full independence from Belgrade in 1999. Consequently, the prevailing concepts of national interest among Serbs and Albanians inherently contradict each other. This very contradiction has become a source of conflict. The existing interethnic character of relations in Kosovo poses a significant hurdle in reaching a compromise solution as part of the process aimed at normalizing Serbia-Kosovo relations. It also presents a substantial challenge for the Serbian community in Kosovo. This situation fosters a conflicted societal sentiment that undermines the consistent application of rights for minority communities in Kosovo. Furthermore, it serves as the basis for numerous discriminatory practices against the Serbian community by Kosovo authorities.

In general conclusion, it can be stated that the concept of Serbian national interest in Kosovo remains fundamentally undefined, burdened by historical legacies, folkloric motifs, and individual political agendas. Within Serbian society, there is no initiative to at least partially articulate this concept through suitable strategies and policies concerning the Kosovo issue within today's foreign policy context. Constructive dialogue is conspicuously absent within Serbian society, reducing the issue of Serbian interests in Kosovo to internal political disputes, non-transparent actions of government officials, and the deliberate suppression of critical viewpoints regarding visible aspects of Serbia's policy toward the matter. Given the absence of broader societal processes aimed at defining these interests and devising policies and strategies for their realization, the NGO CASA has ambitiously undertaken this study to address the question of Serbia's national interest in Kosovo from the perspective of those who reside there – the Serbian community in Kosovo. This study is precisely focused on this endeavor.

¹⁶ Karagaća, M. (May 8, 2008). Struggle for Kosovo or Power. *Danas*. Retrieved from: <https://www.danas.rs/dijalog/licni-stavovi/borba-za-kosovo-ili-za-vlast/>

¹⁷ Graczyk, D.A. & Giannakos, S.A.A. (2006). The Face of Kosovo Albanian Nationalism: A Violent and Volatile Transformation of the Balkan Political Landscape. *Mediterranean Quarterly* 17(4), 142-159. Retrieved from: <https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/206053>. Serwer, D. & Bajraktari, Y. (2006). Kosovo: Ethnic Nationalism at Its Territorial Worst. US Institute of Peace. Retrieved from: <http://www-wjstor.org/stable/resrep12326>



2. The present state of the Serbian community in Kosovo

2.1 Assessment of the current position of the Serbian community in Kosovo

As we highlighted earlier, the key strategic frameworks from which the main actors in Belgrade and Pristina approach the Kosovo issue encompass a spectrum of interests that are not necessarily aligned with the core tenets of what is perceived as the national interest. These interests can stem from objective circumstances of global geopolitical shifts within which the Kosovo dispute is viewed, but they also encompass the personal and party-specific interests of their leaders. Within this fusion of intersecting interests, the primary objective of this study/initiative is to prioritize the interests of the most vulnerable demographic group impacted by the outcomes of the dialogue process– the Serbs in Kosovo – and this is done for a significant reason.

At the time being, Kosovo Serbs are facing a myriad of existential challenges in their day-to-day lives. These challenges include compromised security, ethnically motivated violence, difficulties accessing services and information, limited freedom of movement, and various forms of discriminatory policies stemming from the unwillingness of Kosovo institutions to consistently apply the legal framework designed to protect the rights of non-majority communities in Kosovo. This concern has been raised not only by representatives of the Serbian community but also by prominent international mechanisms that monitor democratic processes in Kosovo¹⁸ While the legal framework that regulates and safeguards the rights of non-majority communities in Kosovo is widely recognized as affirmative, numerous warnings emphasize that a substantial portion of these rights remains merely letter on a paper. The implementation of these rights is often inconsistent and selective. Consistent implementation of the legal framework directed towards non-majority communities is often openly conditioned by the existence of a political will, which establishes a sort of legal-political precedent, as the implementation of the rights of non-majority communities is reduced to the level of discretionary power of political representatives of the Albanian majority. This climate of legal uncertainty, coupled with unequal access to public resources, services, and information, as well as persistent ethnic tensions, significantly impacts the quality of life for Kosovo Serbs and has repercussions on the democratic character of Kosovo society.

On the other hand, there are significant democratic deficits within the Serbian community itself, resulting in various forms of discrimination against individuals or the establishment of a non-affirmative social environment for specific social groups within the Serbian community. The absence of political pluralism, limited freedom of expression, electoral pressures, preferential access to public affairs, positions, and resources, along with a notable level of corruption and a decline in the quality of education, are just a few of the adverse factors. These issues cannot solely be attributed to the consequences of ethnic conflicts; rather, they stem from irresponsible policies and practices within the Serbian community.

The consequence of such practices and approaches is the extremely challenging situation faced by the Serbian community in Kosovo. Confronted with various forms of institutional and societal discrimination¹⁹, burdened by socio-economic challenges,

¹⁸ EU. (2022). Progress Report on Kosovo. Retrieved from: <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/Kosovo%20Report%202022.pdf>

¹⁹ State Department. (2022). Human Rights Report. Retrieved from: https://xk.usembassy.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/133/HumanRightsReport2022_Serbian.pdf

hindered access to basic services, and persistent ethnic tensions and security risks, an increasing number of Serbs are choosing to leave Kosovo. In terms of available statistics, it's challenging to obtain a clear insight into the proportions of migration trends, primarily because the Serbian community has boycotted all population censuses in Kosovo since 1991. Nonetheless, certain official data points offer some perspective on the scale of this issue.

For instance, according to statistics from the School Administration for Kosovo, in September 2012, approximately 25,000 students were attending primary and secondary schools in Kosovo²⁰. Nearly a decade later, the same source, the School Administration for Kosovo, reports that only 15,000 students are enrolled in primary and secondary schools.²¹ Within just the last decade, the number of students attending primary and secondary schools has decreased by 10,000, or 40%. Even more worrisome is the fact that these statistics pertain to the age group of 7 to 18 years old, indicating that, in most cases, it involves the departure of entire families rather than individuals. The gravity of the issue has been highlighted by numerous prominent individuals and societal leaders who participated in our study.²² They point out various factors contributing to this trend, which are not necessarily linked to ethnic conflict (although security is one of the factors influencing negative migration trends), including lack of or poor quality of services, discriminatory employment practices, restricted access to resources, and more. In a general sense, it can be asserted with relatively low risk that the level of migration from the Serbian community has reached a point of existential threat.²³ For that reason, this research has taken a focused approach to delve into the complexity of this matter.

2.2 Short historical overview of migration patterns in Kosovo²⁴

The dynamics of demographic history in Kosovo have been set into motion by a complex interplay of social, legal, political, religious, and cultural factors. These intertwined processes have continually reshaped the ethnic composition of the region, with a central outcome being the gradual reduction in the number of Serbs within Kosovo. The most profound consequence of these migratory shifts, coupled with demographic changes²⁵ is the diminishing number of Serbs, now accounting for approximately 5% of Kosovo's total inhabitants²⁶. Given the notable continuity in migratory processes, there exists a possibility of attrition in human resources within the Serbian communities in Kosovo, raising concerns about their biological perseverance. On the other hand, since socio-political context typically influences the nature of migratory processes, the nature of Serbian population migration²⁷ today is not primarily linked to

²⁰ Schools in Kosovo ready for the start of the school year. (September 2, 2012). Radio KIM. Retrieved from: <https://www.radio-kim.net/vesti/skole-na-kosovu-spremne-za-pocetak-skolske-godine.html>

²¹ Zaporožac: We have over 15,000 students in Serbian communities in Kosovo, the goal is to have even more. (June 2, 2021). Kosovo Online. Retrieved from: link

²² Participant 3: *I don't see in the perspective that Serbs will come out as winners in the current socio-political events. I think that in about ten years, there will be so few Serbs left that Serbian communities will de facto be half-empty, like villages in Serbia.*

²³ Countdown: Serbian community in Kosovo facing existential fear and lack of optimism, caught between hypocrisy and imposed solutions. (May 10, 2023). Retrieved from: <https://www.medijacentar.info/odbrojavanje-srpska-zajednica-na-kosovu-uz-egzistencijalni-strah-i-manjak-optimizma-izmedju-licemerja-i-nametnutih-resenja/>

²⁴ In order to comprehend the issues that will be explored in this study, it is essential to recognize that the population census in Kosovo has a lengthy history of number manipulation, as elucidated in the authored text by Stefan Surlić, an assistant at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Belgrade. This bears particular significance as we delve deeper into the text, revealing a substantial disparity within official estimations concerning the count of Serbs residing in Kosovo, as well as those who have departed. More intricate details about these numerical manipulations can be accessed through the provided. Retrieved from link

²⁵ Natural population growth of the Albanian population has been higher than the European average (1.9) for decades, and according to the 2011 census data, it stands at 2.1. Albanian population in Kosovo, alongside Albania, is the only one to record a positive natural population growth in recent years. Retrieved from: link

²⁶ Denda, S., Micić, J., Todorčić, J. (2022). Characteristics of Migration Processes in the Kosovo and Metohija Region from the Beginning of the 20th Century to Today. Belgrade: Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts. Geographic Institute "Jovan Cvijić".

²⁷ For instance, after Kosovo gained broad autonomy through legal and constitutional solutions in the period from 1945 to 1974, legal pressure and difficult living conditions were the main reasons for the migration of Serbian population from Kosovo. Ibid

an existential threat but rather to sociological, political, and economic conditions in Kosovo that have shaped the opportunities and perspectives of Serbs in the region. Silent migrations have been identified in the past decade as a key issue, the resolution of which can potentially facilitate the sustainability and socio-economic development of the Serbian community in Kosovo.

The complex historical, demographic, and migratory processes of the past, influenced by socio-political factors, have been further complicated by military intervention and security crisis in the late 1990s and early 2000s. These persistent patterns prevailed until nowadays. Consequently, the current proportion of Serbs within the overall population stands at approximately 5%, marking a stark decline. This rapid drop in the Serbian population within Kosovo raises profound concerns about the community's viability, sustainability, and growth trajectory. The absence of concrete data on natural population growth within the Serbian community adds another layer of complexity, making precise estimations unfeasible due to this demographic data gap. Moreover, the departure of a substantial number of young and working-age individuals underscores a stalling societal development and paints a grim picture of negative trends in natural population renewal. The escalating issue of Serbian population migration threatens the very existence of the Serbian community in Kosovo.

2.3 The nature of migration trends among Serbs from Kosovo

Migratory movements are shaped by various social factors, including sociological, political, economic, cultural, and others. In the context of Kosovo, these migrations are deeply influenced by the legacy of the 1999 war and the ongoing ethnic tensions that played a pivotal role in sparking that conflict. Among Serbs from Kosovo, two distinct migration patterns stand out: *forced migrations* and *silent migrations*.

Undoubtedly, the predominant type of migration in the modern history of Kosovo is forced migration, a term defined by UNHCR as the displacement resulting from persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or human rights violations²⁸. By cross-referencing various available data²⁹, it is estimated that approximately 235,000 Serbs left Kosovo following the NATO bombardment of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999, while during the March pogrom 2004 over 4,000 Serbs departed. The return of displaced individuals, however, remains negligible³⁰.

With the stabilization of the security situation in Kosovo and the establishment of partial socio-political stability, a new form of migration, known as silent migrations, has emerged. These migrations are voluntary in nature and are shaped by a complex interplay of economic, political, and social factors. In the context of Serbian communities in Kosovo, the concept of silent migrations carries an added dimension as these population movements elude official detection and lack precise data. Over the past decade, significant changes have taken place in northern Kosovo following the change of government in Serbia in 2012. These changes were a result of evolving relations between Belgrade and Pristina. They primarily included the dismantling of administrative and legal institutions of the Republic of Serbia, along with the transfer of the distribution and power supply system. Simultaneously, the formation of a new political elite through the Srpska lista led to a centralization of power, accompanied

²⁸ UNHCR, Refugee statistics. <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/insights/explainers/forcibly-displaced-pocs.html>

²⁹ Amnesty International. <https://www.amnesty.org/fr/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/eur700042007en.pdf> <https://www.unhcr.org/3-ba0bbeb4.pdf>

https://kirs.gov.rs/media/uploads/Migracije/O-migracijama/Strategija_odrzivog_opstanka_i_povratka_na_KiM.pdf

³⁰ According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) data, up until March 2008, only 18,060 Serbs and other citizens had returned to Kosovo. The Commissariat for Refugees and Migration of the Republic of Serbia disagrees with this estimate, considering that the number has increased. Additionally, living conditions for returnees are often inadequate and hostile. More details at: https://kirs.gov.rs/media/uploads/Migracije/O-migracijama/strategija_upravljanje_migracijama.pdf

by a lack of transparency and accountability in the political process. The cumulative effect of these factors is a hastening of silent migration, characterized by the sporadic but continuous departure of the population, especially the youth, a trend substantiated by empirical research³¹. It has been estimated that over the past decade, within the scope of silent migration processes, approximately 40,000 Serbs have left Kosovo. Although these migrations are voluntary, the socio-political circumstances under which they occur, along with the consequences they have on the sustainability of the Serbian community in Kosovo, imbue them with a negative character.

2.4 Origins of population migration

The primary drivers behind the quiet migrations of Serbs from Kosovo are complex and involve economic, political, and societal factors. One of the central economic challenges within the Serbian community in Kosovo is a pervasive unemployment crisis. This problem is further compounded by the disproportionate growth of the public sector, which dominates the job market and significantly overshadows the private sector. Accessibility to the public sector remains a challenge for citizens, a reality substantiated by empirical studies that reveal a notable level of corruption deeply rooted within the healthcare and educational systems. In these public sectors, where institutions are often treated as personal fiefdoms, an environment conducive to the abuse of power is fostered, ultimately contributing to a negative perception of state institutions in northern Kosovo.

Economic factors typically serve as the primary incentive for migratory patterns, particularly among the youth and educated demographic categories³². In the context of the Serbian community in Kosovo, economic factors often intertwine with political and societal elements, collectively fostering an inhospitable environment for the youth and the population at large. The political concerns prompting Serbs to depart Kosovo are a direct consequence of the unstable and uncertain political atmosphere. Furthermore, compromised safety and security play a substantial role in exacerbating these circumstances³³.

Of particular concern is the issue of the young people, who, upon exiting the education system, face a myriad of challenges. Their academic qualifications often fail to secure employment, and in many cases, they struggle to find work at all. This phenomenon serves as a deterrent, urging them to leave their communities. This assertion is supported by research conducted within Serbian communities in Kosovo, which indicates a strong propensity for emigration among young people, given the lack of prospects and job security in Kosovo.

2.5 Youth migration – Case study

The case study³⁴ conducted by CASA revealed that leaving Northern Kosovo was the choice of over 60% of the students from the Gymnasium in North Mitrovica. Within the 2020 graduating class, comprising a total of 40 students (21 in the natural sciences-mathematics and 19 in the social sciences-linguistics track), 25 students (17 from

³¹ In the last decade, the civil sector has conducted a series of research studies related to the issue of youth migration. The results show that an increasing number of young people are thinking about, planning, and actually carrying out their plans to leave Kosovo. Retrieved from: <https://www.glasamerike.net/a/kosovo-mladi-odlazak/3405101.html>
<https://kossev.info/zasto-mladi-odlaze-sa-severa/>

³² In a study on demographic and economic determinants, it has been demonstrated how low wages and high unemployment, primarily among young individuals, influence migration patterns within a community. Simpson, N. (2022). Demographic and economic determinants of migration. IZA World of Labor. DOI: 10.15185/izawol.373.v2

³³ One of the indicators is the frequency of ethnic incidents. In the period from 2021 to 2023, 128 ethnically motivated incidents were recorded in Kosovo. Retrieved from: <https://www.kim.gov.rs/incidenti-kim.php>.

³⁴

the natural sciences-mathematics track and 8 from the social sciences-linguistics track) chose to leave Kosovo. The most pronounced proportions of this phenomenon are evident in the context of the 4/1 class within the natural sciences-mathematics program, where out of a total of 21 students, 17 opted to depart from Kosovo.

Despite the initial impetus being the pursuit of better educational opportunities in Serbia, a multitude of factors, working in concert, have been identified as drivers behind the departure of the young population. A range of influences, spanning economic (employment nepotism, corruption, unfavorable job market for the youth), political (security, stability, political turbulence), and sociological (education quality, daily life) factors, have collectively shaped their decisions to leave.

The state of the education system in northern Kosovo stands out as the primary factor driving the departure of individuals from the 2020 generation. Young people perceive the quality of academic education at the University of Mitrovica as insufficiently high, lacking comprehensiveness, and not adequately aligned with the demands of the job market. Additionally, political factors, such as political instability and ethnic conflict, have played a significant role in influencing the youth's decision to leave. These young individuals often describe political instability using euphemisms like "tension" and "problems," showing limited interest in political events within their community. Ethnic conflict remains a pressing issue for the 2020 generation, indicating a strong ethnic divide and suggesting that reconciliation efforts made over the last 20 years have not achieved the desired outcomes. Another significant factor identified is the lack of opportunities for the economic empowerment of young individuals, especially the challenging job market for youth and instances of economic crime.

From the perspective of Generation 2020, the job market in northern Kosovo does not offer opportunities aligned with their career aspirations after graduation, and it is perceived as unwelcoming. Moreover, corruption and nepotism present formidable barriers to their employment prospects in the region. Additionally, several personal factors influence the youth's decision to leave, including the support of their parents and friends. Parents endorse their children's departure, believing that it offers protection and aids them in achieving success in their chosen fields later on. The support of friends is so significant that it underlies the "snowball effect," a specific phenomenon in the migration patterns of young people from northern Kosovo. The combined impact of these factors is such that no member of the 2020 generation intends to return to Kosovo after completing their studies.³⁵

The migration of young individuals, especially those with higher levels of education, places a dual burden on the human capital of the Serbian community in Kosovo. Qualitatively, it operates under the assumption that the most intelligent and talented young people leave, subsequently utilizing their potential to contribute to the communities they relocate to, resulting in a loss for the Serbian community in Kosovo. Human resources are paramount for the sustainability and future development of the community. Quantitatively, the ongoing departure of young individuals reduces the reproductive potential of the Serbian community. Demographically, this leads to an aging population and a trajectory towards depopulation within the community. Ultimately, this decline in population quality of life affects communities with an older demographic, resulting in reduced investments. These demographic processes have repercussions on the lives of those who choose to remain, including young individuals who opt to stay in their home community. This, in turn, perpetuates a cycle of migra-

³⁵ No respondent would return unconditionally. Two would return under the condition of improved labor market conditions, although they don't believe that will happen. The rest do not consider the possibility of returning.

tory processes. Although migrations are not inherently negative and the native community can gain benefits³⁶, the case of the Serbian community in Kosovo is not a positive one. The culmination of these migratory processes gives rise to uncertainty regarding the perseverance of the Serbian community in Kosovo. The direct and indirect consequences of these migrations represent an immeasurable loss of human potential for a community lacking inherent self-renewal capacity. This research underscores that the reasons behind Serb departures from Kosovo are multifaceted. Development of the policies and practices to foster a positive environment for resident retention is the shared responsibility of both Belgrade and Pristina. Therefore, both sides are obliged to adopt a constructive approach in the ongoing negotiation process, which will define essential and lasting solutions for the Serbian community in Kosovo. The viability of the Serbian community's existence in Kosovo hinges on the quality of the solutions generated through the upcoming dialogue on implementing the European plan for Kosovo. As such, it remains crucial to legitimize this process by allowing genuine community representatives to articulate their true interests. This study serves as a testament to these efforts.

³⁶ Positive aspects of population migration to the home community can be found in the case of the Albanian diaspora. In the analysis of this phenomenon, Golopeni highlights the diaspora's contribution to the fight for Kosovo's independence, as well as significant financial resources allocated for the revitalization of Kosovo's economy after the war.



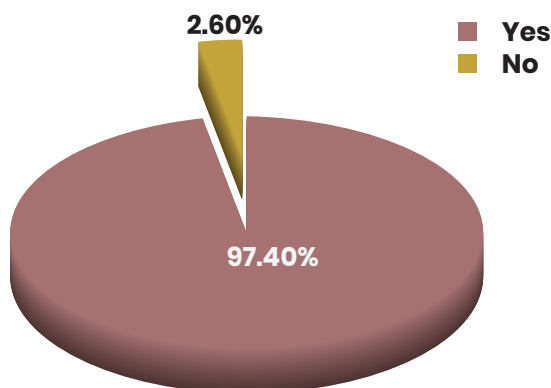
3. Kosovo Serbs' perceptions on national interest – research results

3.1 Serbian national interests in Kosovo from Kosovo Serb's perspective

The primary concepts of national interests in the initial phase of the research are delineated in the qualitative segment of the study by the political leaders, civil activists, journalists, and other participants. While the interviews were initially designed to be structured, they evolved into a semi-structured format in practice, as certain participants stimulated further inquiries and elucidations through their viewpoints.

The prevailing number of distinguished members of the Serbian community, in the initial phase of the study, responded to the question formulated: "Considering the current international political constellation around Kosovo, Serbia's position, and the position of Kosovo Serbs, how would you define the Serbian national interest in Kosovo in one sentence?" They defined this interest as the creation of conditions for ensuring the sustainable presence of Serbs in Kosovo. The formulation of the question itself aimed to steer away from ethno-mythological concepts of the Serbian national interest, prompting respondents to seek their answers within the realm of realpolitik, while taking into account the existing relationships in Kosovo and the broader region. Due to the qualitative nature of the study and the open-ended question styles, the formulations used by respondents varied based on personal viewpoints, priorities, or how respondents chose to articulate their stances. By far, the largest number of them either explicitly defined the interest as the perseverance³⁷ (remaining, survival) of the Serbian community in Kosovo or indicated socio-political changes that would ultimately lead to the cessation of negative migration trends³⁸. This viewpoint held by representatives of the Serbian community was subject to quantitative testing in the later part of the study, through surveys conducted on randomly selected adult members of the Serbian community across Kosovo. The results indicate that a significant 97.4% of respondents concur with this definition of the Serbian interest.

Graph 1 - Distribution of Respondents' Answers to the Question: "Do you agree with the statement that the national interest of Kosovo Serbs is to create conditions for the sustainable presence of the Serbian community in Kosovo? (Creating conditions for Serbs to be able to stay and live in Kosovo."



³⁷ Respondent 2, politician: "The national interest of Serbs in Kosovo, alongside the many other problems they face living in these areas, is currently exclusively focused on survival and preserving the population." Quote from research archives.

Respondent 6, civil activist: "The preservation and creation of necessary conditions for a dignified and prosperous life in Kosovo, as well as the return of displaced individuals." Quote from research archives.

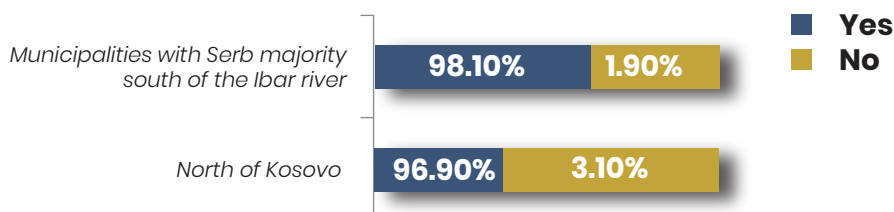
Respondent 4, journalist: "The perseverance of Serbs in Kosovo through the provision of economic, educational, healthcare, and security conditions for a normal life."

³⁸ Goran Avramović, Editor-in-Chief of Radio KiM, Gračanica: "Building sustainable and functional systems free from any forms of corruption within the autonomy for Serbs that will stabilize the community and halt the exodus of Serbs from Kosovo." Quote from research archives.

Miloš Subotić, social activist from North Mitrovica: "The greatest national interest is to preserve this number of Serbs in Kosovo

The differences are minimal when comparing the attitudes of citizens living in northern Kosovo and those living in Serbian communities south of the Ibar River. In both cases, the number of respondents who disagree with this statement is negligible.

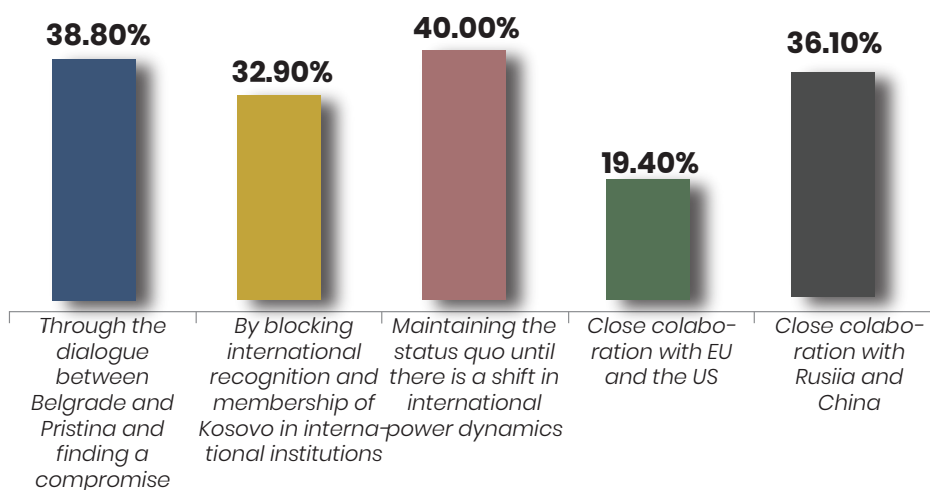
Graph 2 – Distribution of respondents' answers to the question: "Do you agree with the statement that the national interest of Kosovo Serbs is to create conditions for the sustainable presence of the Serbian community in Kosovo? (Creating conditions for Serbs to be able to remain living in Kosovo.)" by place of residence



Given the high degree of concurrence, as well as the responses from a substantial number of interviewed prominent representatives of the Serbian community, it can be confidently concluded that the primary and crucial national interest of the Serbian community lies in shaping a social and political environment conducive to maintaining the Serbian presence in Kosovo.

When it comes to the strategies that should be applied to achieve these interests, there doesn't appear to be a prevailing consensus or a clear-cut approach among the surveyed citizens. They were presented with the opportunity to assess various strategic approaches that are currently being discussed in the political spheres of both Serbia and the Kosovo Serb community and promoted by political actors and intellectual circles. Respondents were asked to evaluate each of the five provided options that could contribute to the defined goal of "ensuring continued residence and a good life." Moreover, they were given the chance to pinpoint a single strategic approach they deemed most suitable for addressing these identified needs.

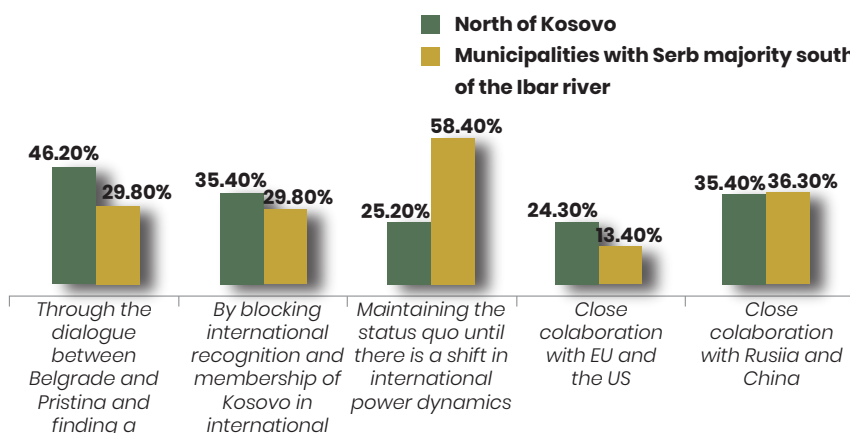
Graph 3: "In what ways can Kosovo Serbs ensure their stay and a good life (circle each option you agree with)"



Noticeably, none of the presented approaches garnered support exceeding 50% among the surveyed citizens. This particular data yields two potential conclusions. Firstly, it implies that designating a singular approach as pivotal for achieving the set objectives may not be feasible, given the substantial diversity of opinions, particularly concerning foreign policy orientations. Secondly, it underscores the need for additional approaches and underscores the necessity of formulating novel methods and models to effectively attain the national interests of Kosovo Serbs. Among the respondents, a mere 5.5% selected the option "something else." However, these responses lacked innovation and included suggestions such as "utilizing all available resources while respecting Resolution 1244," "employing the use of force," "restoring institutions within the RS system³⁹" and similar propositions.

The analysis of results as per the place of residence of the respondents reveals distinct perceptions. Among Serbs residing in the north of Kosovo, the most prominent percentage emphasized the significance of the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue (46.2%) in establishing the conditions for the Serbian community's sustained presence in Kosovo. In contrast, Serbs living south of the Ibar River (58.4%) leaned towards maintaining the status quo until shifts in international dynamics occurred. This disparity underscores two markedly different viewpoints: The northern population anticipates potential solutions through dialogue, while the southern population appears less optimistic about an imminent change and is more reliant on geopolitical realignments for a favorable outcome.

Graph 4 - Distribution of respondents' answers to the question: "In what way can Kosovo Serbs secure their presence and a good life? (check each option you agree with)" by place of residence



Interestingly enough, the disparity in opinions among respondents from northern Kosovo concerning reliance on Russia and China (35.4%) versus the EU and the USA (24.3%) is not as pronounced as observed in the southern region. A comparison with findings from prior surveys⁴⁰ leads to the inference that the confidence of citizens in northern Kosovo in the constructive involvement of the USA and the European Union⁴¹ in the normalization process between Pristina and Belgrade has experienced a noteworthy upswing (24.3%).

This can be attributed to observable positive trends in cooperation between the United States and the Republic of Serbia, which have resulted in significant shifts in public perception regarding the role played by prominent "Western diplomacies" in

³⁹ NGO CASA, research archive.

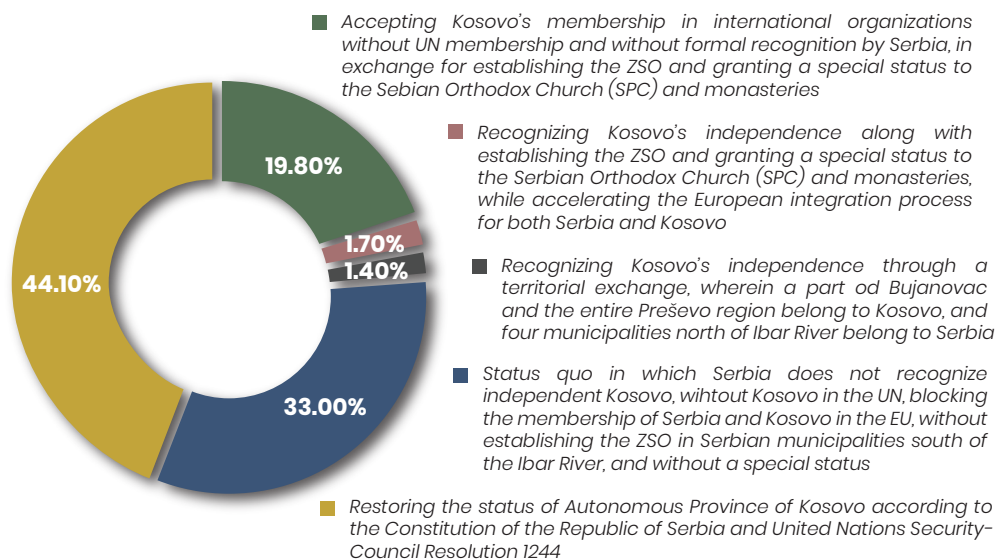
⁴⁰ Trends Analysis in 2020, NVO AKTIV, results of responses to the question: "Which international actors best defend Serbian interests in Kosovo?" EU 9.8%, USA 1.7%. Retrieved from: <https://ngoaktiv.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Analiza-trendova-2020-EN.pdf>

⁴¹ Vučević with Hill: Strengthening the relationship between Serbia and the USA. (January 31, 2023). Kosovo online. Retrieved from: <https://www.kosovo-online.com/vesti/politika/vucevic-sa-hilom-jacanje-odnosa-srbije-i-sad-31-1-2023>

addressing the Kosovo issue. The notable shift in attitudes, marked by a perceptible "softening" of positions traditionally characterized by more rigid convictions within the Serbian community in the northern region, is further exemplified by the substantial support for the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina (46.2%). Upon delving into the political context behind these findings during the qualitative phase of the study, a distinguished civic activist explained the somewhat unexpected northern outcomes as being influenced by the "greater impact of media from Belgrade"⁴². In his assessment, these media outlets are increasingly advocating for "difficult compromises and a redirection of Serbia away from Russia towards the West"⁴³.

Continuing with the research, we proceeded to explore the viewpoints of the citizens regarding potential political avenues through which the aforementioned interests of Kosovo Serbs could be effectively pursued. Similar to the previous query, respondents were presented with prevalent political concepts endorsed by diverse political actors, both within Serbia and the Serbian community in Kosovo

Graph 5 - Distribution of respondents' answers to the question: "If the objective is to ensure the perseverance of Serbs in Kosovo, which of the existing political approaches is the most suitable? (circle one option)"



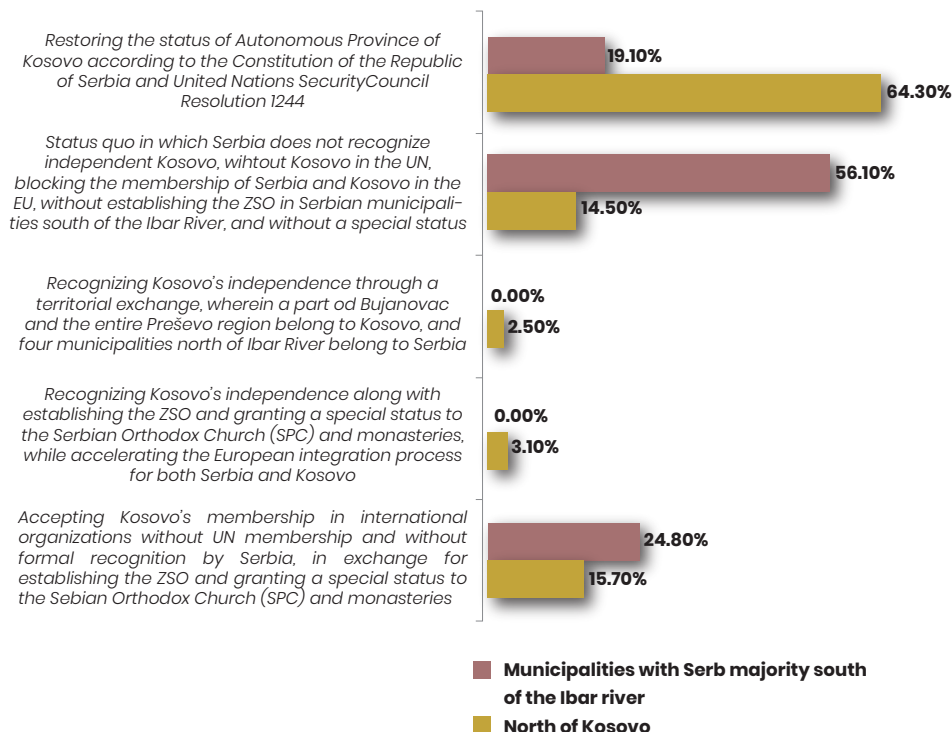
In terms of securing the continued presence of Serbs in Kosovo, a notable majority of respondents (44.1%) believe that the most suitable approach would involve reverting the status of Kosovo to that of the Autonomous Province of Kosovo, as outlined in the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia and UN Resolution 1244. A slightly smaller proportion (33%) highlights the importance of maintaining the status quo, wherein Serbia does not recognize Kosovo's independence, precluding its UN membership and obstructing both Serbian and Kosovo accession to the EU. Additionally, this approach involves forgoing the establishment of the Community of Serb Municipalities (ZSO) in southern municipalities and refraining from granting a distinct status to the Serbian Orthodox Church and monasteries.

Taking a different perspective, the analysis of desired political outcomes in the Kosovo dispute reveals intriguing interpretations based on the respondents' residency, notably the viewpoints of Kosovo Serbs residing on either side of the Ibar River (as illustrated in the graph below).

⁴² Participant 18 (requesting anonymity).

⁴³ Ibid.

Chart 6 – Distribution of respondents' answers to the question: "If the goal is to ensure the preservation of Serbs in Kosovo, which of the existing political approaches is the most suitable?" based on place of residence



Taking a closer look at the analysis, we can discern significant disparities in how the desired political outcome for the Kosovo issue is perceived. Notably, the Serbian community living north of the Ibar River demonstrates a clear inclination towards the option of reintegrating Kosovo into the constitutional framework of the Republic of Serbia, with a substantial majority of respondents (64.3%) favoring this approach. On the other hand, among respondents residing south of the Ibar River, the prevailing choice (56.1%) leans towards maintaining the status quo, even if it means forgoing the establishment of the Community of Serb Municipalities. These contrasting viewpoints can be attributed to distinct socio-political dynamics within these two communities. The narratives emanating from Belgrade continue to influence the Serbian community in the north, where the idea of a territorial exchange – involving the integration of the northern region into the constitutional order of the Republic of Serbia – is considered a viable solution⁴⁴. Conversely, the same idea evokes considerable apprehension among the Serbian community south of the Ibar River. This apprehension is rooted in concerns over the potential loss of affirmative rights and administrative ties with Serbia, leading respondents from this community to favor the status quo as the more favorable option⁴⁵.

3.2 Attitudes of Kosovo Serbs towards responsible parties

Drawing insights from the previous segment of the research, we arrive at several crucial conclusions. The first one is that, despite the observed trends indicating growing support for dialogue and compromise solutions, the perspectives of Kosovo Serbs on the outcome of the process still uphold the notion of Kosovo returning to the

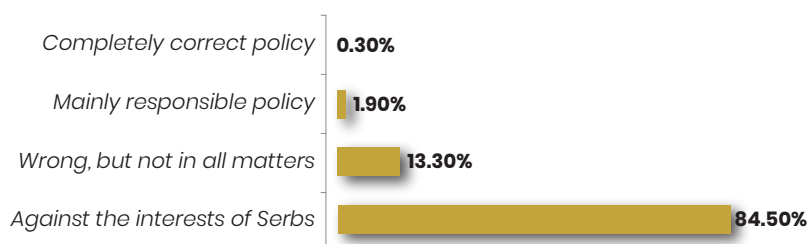
⁴⁴ Les: Division of Kosovo remains an option; Ravasi: Pentagon considered it. (February 15, 2023). Kosovo online. Retrieved from: <https://www.kosovo-online.com/analize/les-podela-kosova-ostaje-opcija-ravasi-pentagon-je-razmatrao-15-2-2023>

⁴⁵ Zorić, O. (February 6, 2019). Serbs from the south of Kosovo 'hostages' of Belgrade and Mitrovica. Radio Slobodna Evropa. Retrieved from: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srpska-zajednica-na-kosovu-izvestaj/29755087.html>

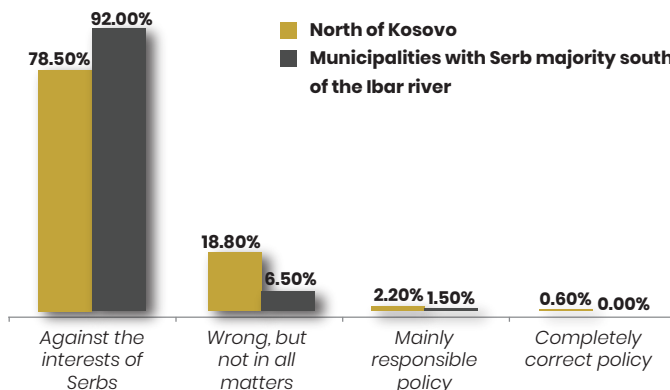
constitutional framework of Serbia. This reflects not just emotional bias at first glance, but also a genuine and profound connection between Kosovo Serbs and Serbia⁴⁶. Remarkably, nearly half of the respondents (44%) believe that achieving the interests of Kosovo Serbs is possible through the reintegration of Kosovo into the constitutional framework of the Republic of Serbia. Such viewpoints persist even though this idea may not align with diplomatic and political mainstream narratives, yet it finds representation in the platforms of pro-national political parties in Serbia and consequently within the Serbian community in Kosovo⁴⁷.

DruMoving on to another significant finding, it's evident that Kosovo Serbs lack trust in Kosovo institutions and Albanian political leaders. This sentiment manifests as a substantial portion of respondents favoring political solutions that exclude the authority of the government in Pristina over the Serbian community. This political stance is supported by nearly two-thirds of the participants, totaling 64% (including both the return of autonomous province status and territorial exchange). This conclusion finds further support in the results of a study section dedicated to exploring Kosovo Serbs' confidence in the Pristina administration. Notably, an overwhelming 84% of respondents perceive policies originating from Pristina as unquestionably harmful to their interests.

Graph 7 - Distribution of respondents' answers to the question: "How do you assess the relationship of the Government of Kosovo and its institutions towards the Serbian community in Kosovo?"



Graph 8 - Distribution of respondents' answers to the question: 'How do you rate the relationship of the Government of Kosovo and its institutions toward the Serbian community in Kosovo?' by place of residence.



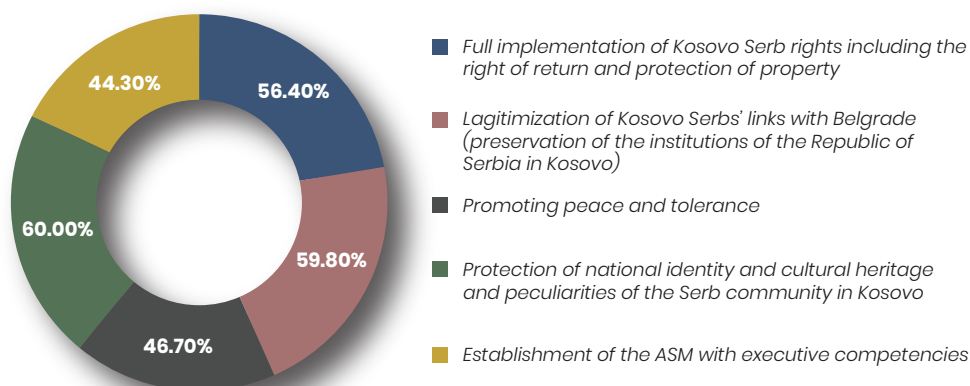
⁴⁶ We, Kosovo Serbs, under the constant pressure of ethnic conflict, feel the inclination towards Serbia as a socio-biological instinct for unity. It translates into ethnic, social, cultural unity, which also manifests in political consensus. Marinković, M. Kosovo Serbs on both sides of the river: Divisions that are unspoken of (October 11, 2021). KIM. Taken from: [source not provided] <https://www.radiokim.net/vesti/analiza/kosovski-srbi-sa-obe-strane-reke-podele-o-kojima-se-cuti.html>

⁴⁷ Group of politicians re-establishes Serbian National Council: Serbian List loses support of the people (June 5, 2023), Danas. Taken from: link

Signing a plan for Kosovo would be a disaster and betrayal (March 2, 2023), Danas. Retrieved from: link

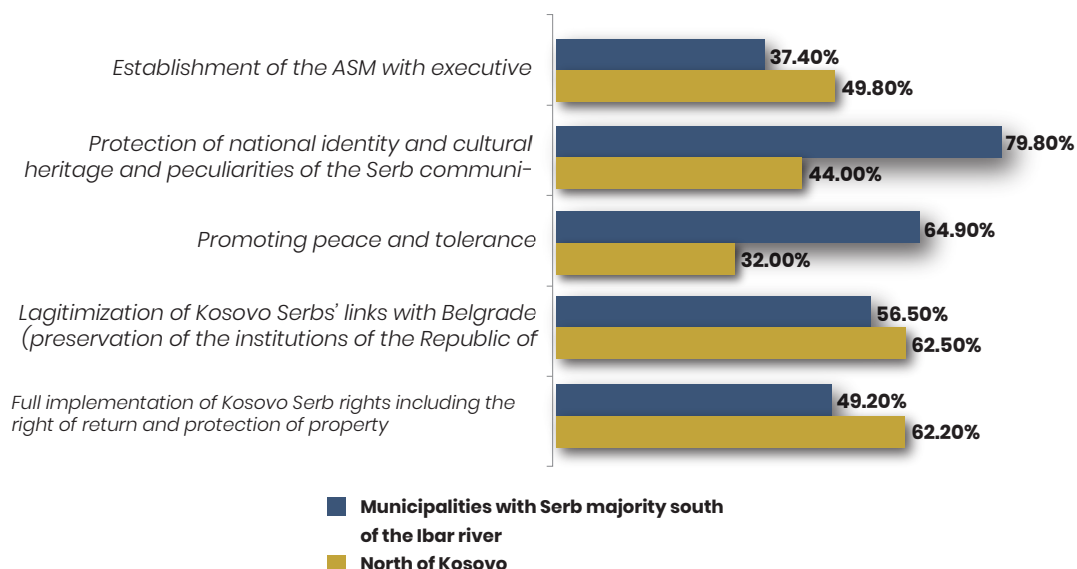
The research highlights an exceptionally negative stance towards the policies of the government in Pristina, a sentiment shared to a considerable extent by both Kosovo Serbs residing to the south and those residing to the north of the Ibar River. However, this sentiment is slightly more pronounced among Serbs in the southern regions. Better understanding can be obtained observing this statistics from another angle. A strikingly small percentage of both northern and southern Kosovo Serbs view Pristina's policies as (mostly) responsible or appropriate in terms of safeguarding the interests of the Serb community in Kosovo. Within the study, we also aimed to portray what Kosovo Serbs perceive as responsible policy-making by Pristina (Graph 9).

Chart 9 – Distribution of respondents' answers to the question: "In your opinion, what constitutes a responsible policy of Pristina towards the Serbs in Kosovo? (Select at least 2 answers)"



More than half of the respondents identified the protection of national identity, cultural heritage, and distinctiveness of the Serbian community in Kosovo (constituting 60% of the total sample) as a form of responsible policy of Pristina towards the Serbs in Kosovo. Following closely is the legitimization of the ties between Kosovo Serbs and Belgrade (preservation of institutions of the Republic of Serbia in Kosovo) comprising 59.8% of the total sample) along with the full implementation of rights for Kosovo Serbs, including the right to return and protection of property.

Graph 10 – Distribution of respondents' answers to the question: "What do you consider as a responsible policy of Pristina towards the Serbs in Kosovo? (Select at least 2 answers)" by place of residence.



Examining the data based on the respondents' places of residence reveals two significant findings. Firstly, an interesting contrast emerges: nearly 80% of respondents from Serbian communities south of the Ibar River believe that a more responsible approach from Pristina is necessary to protect the national identity and cultural heritage of the Serbian community in Kosovo, while this sentiment is shared by 44% of respondents from the north. This stark difference is a reflection of distinct socio-political contexts within these two demographically distinct regions. The Serbian community in northern Kosovo maintains a stronger connection with the Republic of Serbia, contributing to a more robust resistance against integration into Kosovo's constitutional system. In contrast, the Serbian community south of the Ibar resides in territorially fragmented, primarily rural settings, rendering them more vulnerable to integration pressures originating from Pristina. This integration pressure manifests as a perceived threat to their national identity and cultural heritage. This sentiment is compounded by voices within the Albanian community that deny Serbian cultural heritage⁴⁸, the endangerment of sites governed by the Serbian Orthodox Church⁴⁹, and the considerable destruction of religious and sacred landmarks⁵⁰. While a comprehensive discussion on the protection of Serbian cultural heritage will follow later in this study, these findings underscore a potent sentiment within the Serbian community. It also serves as a cautionary signal to Pristina and the international community: the perceived sense of security among Kosovo Serbs is intricately tied to their insulation from the influences of policies emanating from Pristina.

Supporting the argument, there is another significant finding from the segment of the study that focuses on the perception of responsible policies by Pristina towards the Serbian community. This finding reveals that only 32% of respondents in northern Kosovo, in contrast to 64% in the southern areas, believe that the Kosovo government should take on a more responsible role in promoting peace and tolerance. The remarkably low percentage of respondents endorsing a stance that reflects an obvious responsibility of the Pristina authorities, underscores the perception of necessity for a form of isolation from the reach of Pristina's influence i.e. reflection of reality in which the Serbs in the northern regions have resided for decades, where the policies emanating from Pristina hold less sway over their lives compared to their compatriots living south of the Ibar River.

Finally, the conclusion of this segment of the study is – that Kosovo Serbs fear the changes⁵¹. Among them, the prevailing belief is that the majority of solutions and agreements reached throughout the negotiation process since 2013 have been detrimental to their interests, while the few agreements intended to enhance their quality of life **have remained unimplemented⁵²**. This further underscores that the Kosovo Serbs and their interests have not been fundamentally represented within the negotiation process itself. These interests are intricate and extensive, requiring not only political pluralism but also a structural process of internal dialogue that will facilitate the open representation of various perspectives, viewpoints, and priorities.

That's precisely what is lacking in the current approach of Belgrade in the dialogue on the normalization of relations with Pristina. The political representation of the Serbian community is predominantly shaped by the privileged relationship between Belgrade and the Srpska lista, accompanied by a systematic suppression of dissenting voices that are often publicly discredited as mere opposition propaganda⁵³. This glaring democratic and ethical deficit⁵⁴ can be traced back to the party-centric approach in addressing the Kosovo issue, or more specifically, the "entanglement" of such a pivot-

⁴⁸ Vladan Stanković, professor at the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade.

⁴⁹ Protection of cultural heritage in Kosovo. (2022). OSCE Mission in Kosovo: Pristina. Retrieved from: <https://www.osce.org/-files/f/documents/c/7/522898.pdf>

⁵⁰ OSCE. (2016). Ground for Peace: Protecting Cultural Heritage in Kosovo. Retrieved from <https://www.osce.org/sr/magazine/277376>

⁵¹ Participant 12: All the changes we have witnessed have made our lives worse and worse, NVO CASA archive.

⁵² NGO Aktiv, Trend Analysis. (2020). Retrieved from: <https://ngoaktiv.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Analiza-trendova-2020-SRBI.pdf>

⁵³ Respondent 44 (requesting anonymity), NVO CASA archive.

⁵⁴ Denying the community the opportunity to participate in a process that determines its future. (Editor's note).

al matter concerning Serbia's national interests within the intricate web of inter-party rivalry, as highlighted at the outset of this study.

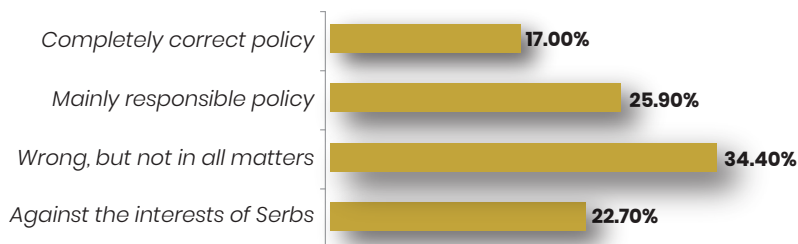
The result of such an approach is a dissonance between state policy and the genuine needs of its beneficiaries, specifically the Serbian community in Kosovo. This dissonance is distinctly illustrated by the findings of this study. The survey results reveal that a total of 77.1% of Serbs in Kosovo view reintegration into Serbia's constitutional framework or the preservation of this perspective through maintaining the status quo, as a solution to the Kosovo issue⁵⁵. This outcome can be indirectly interpreted as a strong opposition among Kosovo's Serbs to the provisions of the "Franco-German" proposal, embraced by the leadership of the Republic of Serbia, that centers on the normalization of relations between Pristina and Belgrade with the inevitable "acknowledgment" of Kosovo's independence⁵⁶.

A similar conclusion arises from the analysis of results related to the option defined as "Acceptance of Kosovo's membership in international organizations without UN membership and formal recognition by Serbia, in exchange for the establishment of the Association of Serbian Municipalities (ZSO) and special status for the Serbian Orthodox Church and monasteries." This option is precisely aligned with the familiar premises of the so-called Franco-German proposal. The survey results indicate that only 20% of Kosovo's Serbs support such a solution. Slightly higher support is observed in Serbian communities south of the Ibar River, with 25.1% of respondents, while the support is around 15% in the northern part.

Hence, the question arises: to what extent is the policy of Belgrade aligned with the true interests of the Serbian community? Our investigation focused precisely on this

3.3 Assessing the Quality Efforts by the Governments of Serbia and Kosovo on Matters of Interest of the Serbian Community in Kosovo – Citizen Perspectives

Chart 11 – Distribution of respondents' answers to the question: "How do you assess the current government's policy of the Republic of Serbia towards Kosovo?"

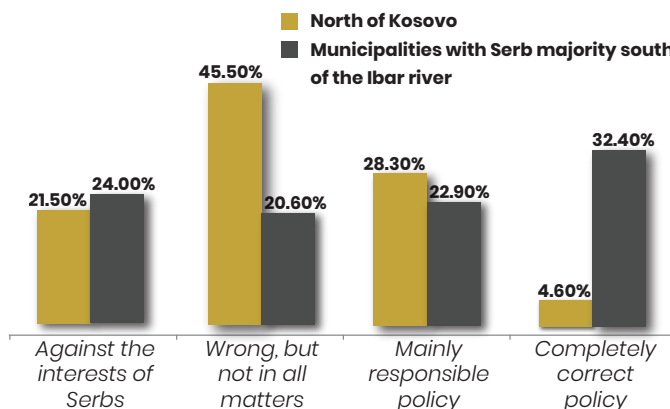


The evaluation of how well-tailored Belgrade's policy is towards Serbs in Kosovo reveals a divided perspective among Kosovo Serbs. In total 34.4% of respondents consider the policy to be partially incorrect, 22.7% view it as entirely incorrect, and 17% regard it as completely correct. This diversity of opinions reflects differing perceptions of the Republic of Serbia's approach to the Kosovo issue. About 57.3% of respondents (cumulatively reflecting partial incorrectness and incorrectness concerning Serb interests) express a negative evaluation, while 42.7% deem the policy to be appropriate. Notably, distinctions emerge based on respondents' geographical location. The majority of respondents from northern Kosovo, at 45.5%, believe that Belgrade's policy is partially incorrect, while the greatest percentage of Serbs residing south of the Ibar River, specifically 32.4%, indicate their belief in the complete correctness of Belgrade's policy.

⁵⁵ Serbia and Kosovo: Belgrade and Pristina agree with the European proposal for Kosovo, says Borrell, Vučić insists on the Community of Serb Municipalities. (February 27, 2023). BBC. Retrieved from: <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/balkan-64771528>

⁵⁶ Participant 42: The Franco-German plan is not recognition of Kosovo but rather an acknowledgment that there are no other options. NGO CASA archive.

Graph 12 – Distribution of respondents' answers to the question: 'How do you evaluate the policy of the current government of the Republic of Serbia towards Kosovo?' by place of residence.



Should there be a reliable conclusion drawn from these results, it would be the one indicating that Kosovo Serbs hold divergent views regarding their support for Belgrade's approach to resolving the Kosovo issue. This is irrespective of the fact that endorsement of a specific proposal known as the Franco-German plan remains exceedingly low, with only one out of every five respondents expressing such support. What's more, these findings suggest a misalignment between the attitudes of Kosovo Serbs toward Belgrade's policies and the singular mechanism by which these policies are validated: elections. Representatives of Belgrade's interests within Kosovo, notably the Srpska lista, have consistently garnered a substantial majority in all prior electoral cycles. In the most recent parliamentary elections held in February 2021, they secured all 10 available mandates⁵⁷. Additionally, in local elections during the same year, they gained control over all 10 municipalities where the Serbian population forms the majority.

In the qualitative part of this study, insights from discussions with informal leaders of the Serbian community in Kosovo shed light on this phenomenon. This understanding emerges from the interplay of two significant factors. Firstly, the complex and enduring ethnic conflicts in Kosovo have led Kosovo Serbs to habitually cast their votes in favor of the ruling parties in Belgrade⁵⁸. Secondly, the electoral process within the Serbian community is invariably accompanied by a surge of pressures exerted upon political adversaries of the Srpska lista and their constituencies. These pressures manifest as aggressive media campaigns aimed at tarnishing political opponents, encompassing tabloid smear tactics, and defamatory narratives. It also extends to discrimination against opponents in terms of resource allocation during electoral proceedings. Furthermore, there are instances of pressures taking on existential dimensions, including threats of job loss or demotion to lower positions⁵⁹.

Given the absence of systemic solutions to incorporate independent voices from the Serbian community into the dialogue regarding the normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina, alternative avenues for expression, such as media and civil initiatives, have emerged as vital conduits for these interests. In this context, this study assumed its intended role by shedding light on these concerns, exploring the perceptions and needs of Kosovo Serbs citizens regarding their perception of what constitutes responsible actions by the Republic of Serbia. As a manifestation of

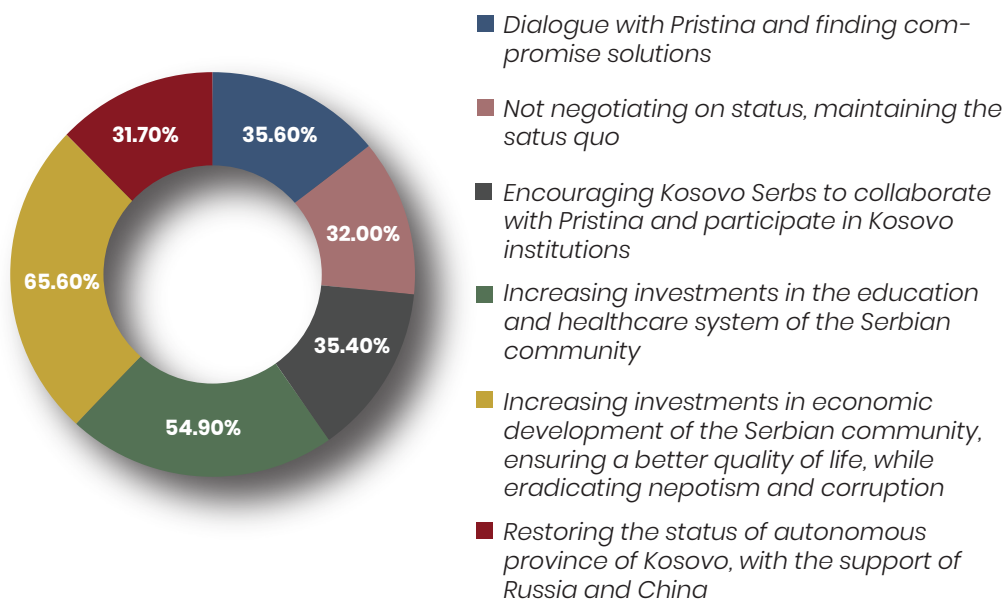
⁵⁷ Voting concluded in Kosovo, Rakić: Serbian List won in all majority Serbian municipalities. (October 17, 2021). Danas. Retrieved from: <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/otvorena-biracka-mesta-za-lokalne-izbore-na-kosovu/>

⁵⁸ Marinković, M. (2021). Characteristics of an Open Society in the Serbian Community. Pristina: KFOS.

⁵⁹ The proportions and systematic nature of efforts to marginalize political opposition within the Serbian community are present to an extent where it can be concluded that political pluralism within the Serbian community has been systematically stifled. Ibid.

of accountable attitudes by Belgrade towards the Serbs in Kosovo, a substantial portion of the surveyed population has emphasized the necessity for increased investments in the economic growth of the Serbian community, accompanied by improvements in living standards while addressing issues like nepotism and corruption (accounting for 65.6% of the total respondents). Furthermore, there is a strong call for heightened investments in education and healthcare infrastructure for the Serbian community (representing 54.9% of the total respondents).

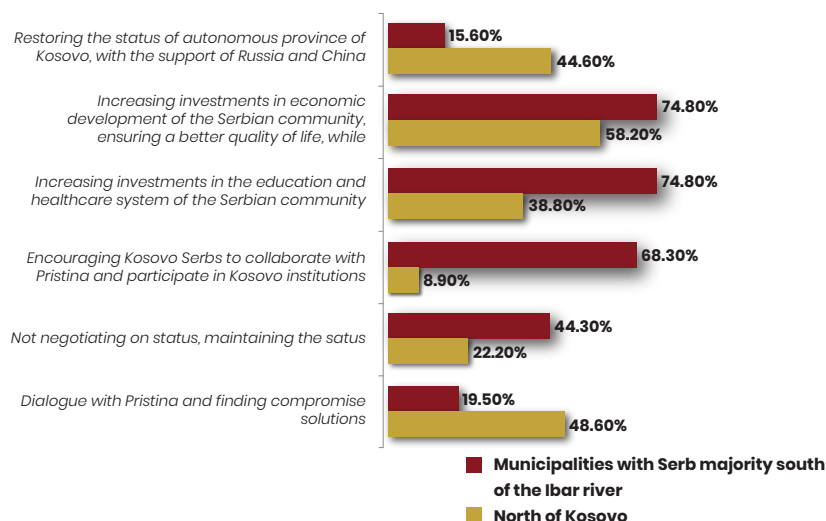
Graph 13 – Distribution of respondents' answers to the question: 'In your opinion, what represents responsible policy of Belgrade towards Serbs from Kosovo? (circle at least 2 answers)'.



Interestingly enough, both of the most common responses happen to be the only options provided that weren't directly linked to Kosovo's status-related issues or the processes aimed at resolving that very status. This observation holds significant implications for comprehending the needs of the Serbian community in Kosovo, as it indicates the citizens' "fatigue" from enduring decades of ethnic conflicts, political tensions, and the challenges of forging a stable and dignified life. This sense of weariness translates into priorities that, in this case, center around everyday life concerns, job stability, economic advancement, and ensuring the provision of essential services like healthcare and social welfare. Analyzing data based on residency further reveals that such a perspective on Belgrade's policies is more pronounced among the Serbian community residing south of the Ibar River. Insights shared by participants in the qualitative segment of the study explain these results by highlighting the community's years-long and nearly complete integration into Kosovo's legal framework, which has shifted their focus toward existential matters.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Respondent from Gračanica: We cannot hope for miracles, like returning to Serbia or something like that, but we can hope not to lose what we have. NGO CASA archive.

Graph 14 – Distribution of respondents' answers to the question: "In your opinion, what does a responsible policy of Belgrade towards the Serbs in Kosovo entail? (Select at least 2 answers)" by



3.4 Kosovo Serbs' perceptions of national interest – Conclusion

The insights gathered from interviews with prominent figures of the Serbian community and the survey of opinions among Kosovo Serbs have revealed an overwhelming consensus (97%) which underscores the core national interest: the imperative of securing the Serbian presence in Kosovo and ensuring the establishment of viable living conditions.

The research findings indicate that the Serbian community in Kosovo perceives autonomy as a fundamental avenue for realizing their national interest. Furthermore, a key facet of this autonomy encompasses the upholding of the Republic of Serbia's institutions in fields like education, healthcare, and social welfare (supported by 84.7%), which continue to function within Kosovo. Amidst the considerable endorsement of prerequisites like security, autonomy, property rights safeguarding, cultural heritage preservation, and anti-corruption efforts, the connection to Serbia in these crucial domains emerges as a paramount and pivotal precondition influencing the majority of Serbs to persist in residing within Kosovo.

In light of the recent agreements achieved through the dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina, it is evident that the Kosovo Serbs, despite formally supporting the process, do not fully grasp the ramifications of the political decisions undertaken. An intriguing 40% of the respondents remain inclined towards maintaining the status quo. In aggregate, a substantial 77.1% of the surveyed Kosovo Serbs envisage the future of Kosovo within the framework of an autonomous province as outlined by Serbia's Constitution and UN Security Council Resolution 1244. Moreover, a remarkable 90.3% of Kosovo Serbs express opposition to Serbia's potential membership in the European Union, should it entail relinquishing or acknowledging Kosovo's independence.

Kosovo Serbs expect Serbia to advocate for their interests, and to pursue a responsible policy that includes stimulating economic development and preserving and enhancing services in healthcare and education. In addition, interviewees point out

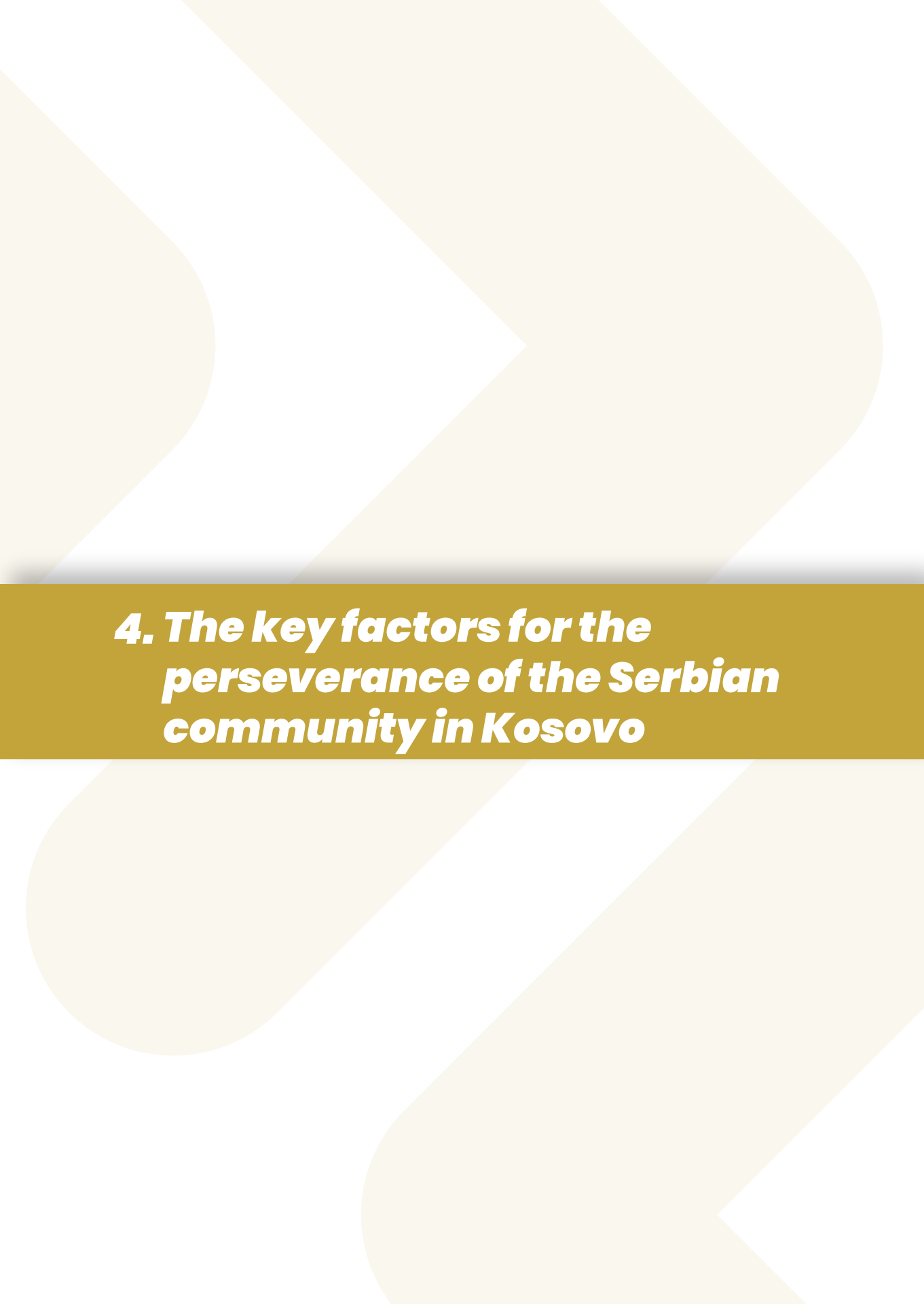
the necessity of ensuring fair non-partisan redistribution of financial assistance, as well as eradicating nepotism and corruption. The importance of transparency in the allocation of financial resources for the Serbian community in Kosovo is especially emphasized. Concerns have been voiced that despite Serbia's pivotal and decisive role in addressing the perseverance issues, the current policies pursued by Belgrade towards Kosovo Serbs are leading to a growing depopulation of the area and the mass departure of Serbian community members.

There are also apprehensions that the Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities (ZSO) might lack genuine democratic legitimacy, potentially being manipulated by the current political faction for appointing exclusively partisan members and serving narrow party interests, rather than prioritizing the interests of the Kosovo Serbs community. Among the interviewed stakeholders, there is consensus that the key role of Belgrade lies in fostering constructive dialogue with Pristina, supporting Kosovo Serbs in vital spheres of life, and advancing Serbian interests within the international community. There are also expectations that with advancement in the dialogue process, Pristina will change its current approaches and take steps toward the protection of the national identity and cultural heritage of the Serbian people, and most importantly validate the special ties between Kosovo Serbs and Belgrade through establishment of the Association of Serb-majority municipalities.

The concerns arise from a notable consensus among Kosovo Serb representatives, indicating an expectation that members of their community will continue leaving Kosovo driven by discontent with their current status. Of significant worry to the community stakeholders is the prevalent sense of defeatism within the Kosovo Serbian community, stemming from the belief that political and economic conditions in Kosovo are unlikely to change, leading to an increasing outward migration, particularly among the younger and educated population. Alongside the misguided policies of the Pristina authorities, there is a particularly emphasized criticism of Belgrade for perpetuating patricianism, nepotism, and an eroded value system.

As emphasized by one of the Serbian representatives, "Unless a lasting institutional solution is found that ensures political and economic stability, along with a degree of decision-making autonomy, the perspective of Kosovo Serbs will be grim, with the community's number steadily declining. However, should both political and economic stability be attained, alongside the continuation of special connections with Serbia, there exists the potential to curb or even reverse this trend.

In the view of those interviewed, the future of the Serbian community in Kosovo is highly uncertain, hinging not only on negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina but also on broader international circumstances, including events like the conflict in Ukraine. Regardless of these complexities, the fundamental right to self-management within the outlined domains remains pivotal for the community's resilience in Kosovo and its pursuit of essential parity with the predominant Kosovo Albanian populace.



4. The key factors for the perseverance of the Serbian community in Kosovo

4.1 Introduction

In analyzing the perceptions of Serbian community over the issue of national interests in Kosovo, a pragmatic perspective emerges. The Serbian community prioritizes practical concerns such as security, economic stability, and education when shaping their priorities. This practical approach doesn't diminish the importance they attribute to issues like national identity/heritage; rather, they coexist along the challenges of everyday struggles. In light of this perspective, the study's results are unequivocal. The qualitative part of the study reveals that a significant majority of respondents (99% of those surveyed, representing the Serbian community in Kosovo) have directly or indirectly correlated their national interests with policies fostering normal living conditions for their community on the Kosovo territory. **Therefore, a well-grounded conclusion can be drawn: the Serbian community's national interest is intrinsically tied to the establishment of an environment conducive to the sustained presence of their community within Kosovo.**

The aforementioned pragmatism is reflected in attitudes concerning the essential strategies required to fulfill the defined interests. Among the surveyed members of the Serbian community, a significant percentage deem it in their interest to achieve "reconciliation between Serbs and Albanians." Additionally, they see the organization of socio-political activities within Kosovo's institutions as crucial (72% of respondents, and notably 91.6% within the community south of the Ibar River).

It is important to highlight that this study was conducted during a period when there was a heightened awareness and growing concern within the Serbian community about migration of a notably high percentage of young individuals from the Serbian community in Kosovo.⁶¹ The apathy and defeatism induced by this process have inevitably impacted how the Serbian community in Kosovo perceives its priorities and, consequently, defines its national interest. Within this context, it is notable that the Serbs in Kosovo do not associate their national interest with the international status of Kosovo. Rather than viewing it as a matter of status, they see it as a question shaped by the responsible policies of both Belgrade and Pristina. These policies should aim to provide the Serbian community with a dignified and productive life in a secure environment. The prerequisites of such a life are explored in the final section of this study, which focuses in identifying the factors that define responsible policies from both Belgrade and Pristina, that will ultimately mitigate, halt, or potentially reverse the negative migration trends.

4.1.1 Autonomous powers of the Kosovo Serb community

(Andrić Rakić Milica)

Two decades after the conclusion of the conflict in Kosovo and over a decade and a half since Kosovo declared independence based on the Comprehensive Proposal of Martti Ahtisaari for the Settlement of Kosovo Status, the Serbian community in Kosovo continues to grapple with issues of existential nature. Prominent representatives of the Serbian community state that it is still in a survival mode, focused solely on the most basic interest—an almost instinctual desire—to persevere in Kosovo.⁶²

From a broader perspective, the position of the Serbian community in Kosovo is influenced by three significant factors that hold a decisive impact on its democratic and developmental capacities. On one hand, there has been a consistent pattern where various Kosovo governments have selectively implemented the rule of law

⁶¹ Aleksandar Arsenijević claims that Serbs in the north are massively withdrawing their children from schools. (July 25, 2023). Danas. Retrieved from: <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/aleksandar-arsenijevic-tvrdi-da-srbi-na-severu-masovno-ispisuju-decu-iz-skola/>

⁶² NGO CASA, research archive

where various Kosovo governments have selectively implemented the rule of law⁶³ and have shown reluctance in fulfilling obligations related to non-majority communities. These governments have either failed to eliminate barriers⁶⁴ to integration or have strategically exploited them as potential bargaining chips in negotiations for the normalization of relations with Belgrade. On the other hand, the pervasive issues of corruption and nepotism have stemmed from the dominance of a single political party, the Srpska Lista, which has faced limited opposition and, as a result, remained largely unaccountable to the citizens it represents. Since its establishment, the Srpska Lista has primarily served as an instrumental tool to ensure the implementation of agreements related to normalization on the ground. This role has often aligned with Serbia's broader interests in cultivating its relationship with the EU and other international dialogue mediators. However, these interests have rarely been aligned with the genuine concerns and aspirations of the Serbian community in Kosovo.

Last but not least, the socio-political circumstances from 1999 to the present day have repeatedly resulted in the re-institutionalization of the Serbian community in Kosovo. A series of transitions, from the withdrawal of Serbian institutions to the establishment of UNMIK-administered institutions, their coexistence with remnants of Serbian establishments, the formation of Kosovo institutions, the process of decentralization, and the creation of new municipalities under the Kosovo legal framework, have rendered the administrative landscape of the community highly complex. Particularly in the northern region, there has been a gradual disintegration of the Serbian system and integration into the Kosovo system. This evolving administrative context has significantly hindered the community's ability to adapt to any arrangement, assess its sustainability, and plan for its future within or beyond Kosovo. The lack of predictability inherent in this constant shift in administrative frameworks constitutes the third factor impacting the sustainable existence of the community. This unpredictability has influenced a significant number of Serbs to leave Kosovo, while also discouraging those who remain from taking proactive steps towards establishing a stable life in Kosovo. While the first two factors prevent the Serbian community from living a dignified life, the third factor hampers the community's productivity and capacity to plan for a better future.

In order to address its fundamental issues, the Serbian community in Kosovo, requires an appropriate institutional framework that takes into account the specific needs of a non-majority group, the needs that has historically not received satisfactory treatment from the current and previous administrations of Kosovo. At the same time, this administrative framework should facilitate the full exercise of citizens' rights guaranteed by law, including those connected to dual citizenship (Serbian citizenship), as well as the legitimization of strong institutional ties between the Serbian community and Belgrade. These connections, which are recognized by existing legal norms and the underlying principles of proposed normalization agreements, continue to be stigmatized and portrayed as the "instrumentalization" of Kosovo Serbs in the public discourse of the Albanian community.

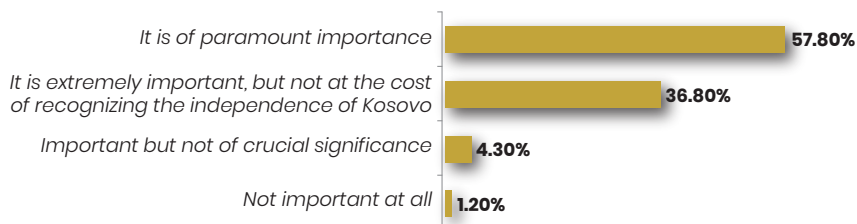
4.1.2 Results of the research: on autonomy

The findings of our study on the perspectives of the Serbian community highlight a distinct recognition of the need for autonomous authority. Among the respondents, a little over half emphasized that securing meaningful autonomy for the Serbian community stands as a pivotal factor in their continued presence within Kosovo. Additionally, 36.8% of those surveyed regard this autonomy as significant, albeit not at the cost of acknowledging Kosovo's independence.

⁶³ An example of non-compliance with the Constitutional Court's decision on the property of the Visoki Dečani Monastery can be found at [link](#).

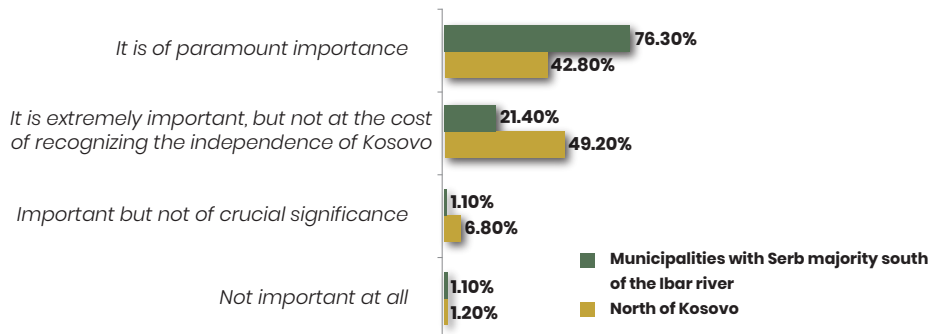
⁶⁴ The process of diploma verification was blocked for 2 years, with fewer than 2000 diplomas from educational institutions in the Serbian language in Kosovo being verified. This effectively prevented Serbs from Kosovo from being employed in public

Graph 15 – Distribution of respondents' answers to the question "To what extent is achieving meaningful autonomy (conditions where Serbs can make decisions without interference from Pristina) a fundamental prerequisite for Serbs to remain in Kosovo?"



Examining the perspectives based on the location of residence, it becomes evident that 76.3% of respondents living south of the Ibar River consider the matter of paramount importance for the continued existence of Serbs in Kosovo. On the northern side, the opinions among Serbs are more divided: 42.8% believe that the issue of substantial autonomy is crucial for their community's perseverance in Kosovo, while 49.2% regard it as significant, but not if it entails recognizing Kosovo's independence. This divergence suggests that while Serbs residing to the south perceive autonomy as a means to enhance their current circumstances and secure their perseverance, a noteworthy portion of respondents in northern Kosovo display skepticism concerning the nature and potential outcomes of such autonomy—particularly in terms of the practical enforceability of non-interference by Pristina's authorities, especially in the context of Kosovo's potential independence recognition.

Graph 16 – Distribution of Respondents' Answers to the Question "To what extent is achieving substantial autonomy (conditions in which Serbs can make decisions without Pristina's interference) an essential prerequisite for Serbs to remain in Kosovo? by place of residence.



A notable majority of participants, amounting to 84.7%, emphasized the critical significance of maintaining the educational, healthcare, and social services framework within the Serbian administrative system, alongside upholding the existing salary structure, for the enduring presence of the Serbian community in Kosovo.

Chart 17 – Distribution of respondent answers to the question "To what extent is preserving the educational, healthcare, and social services system within the Serbian administrative system, along with maintaining the salary structure, a fundamental precondition for Serbs to remain in Kosovo?"

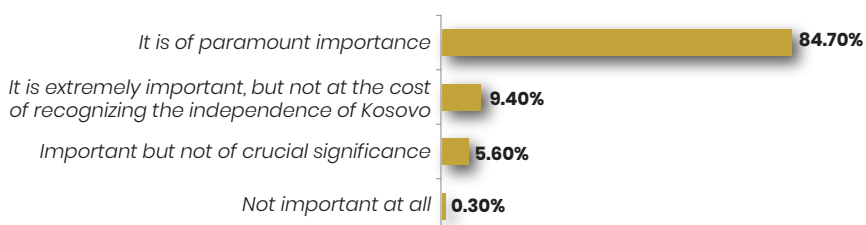
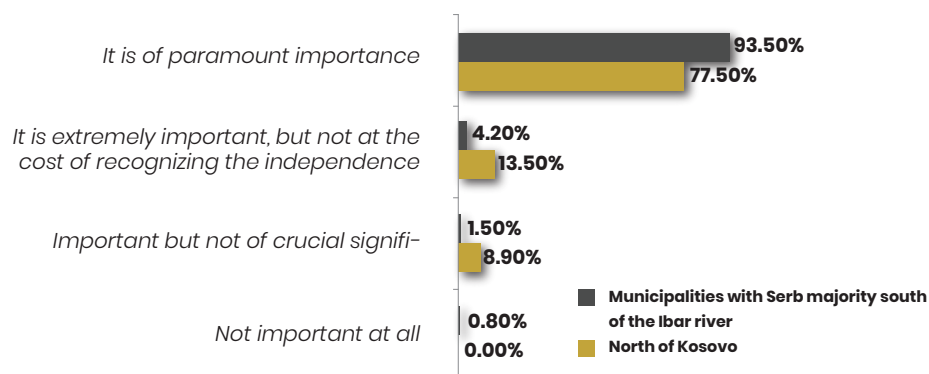


Chart 18 – Distribution of respondent answers to the question “To what extent is preserving the educational, healthcare, and social services system within the Serbian administrative system, along with maintaining the salary structure, a fundamental precondition for Serbs to remain in Kosovo?” based on the place of residence



Examining the disparity based on the place of residence, a notable 93.5% of respondents residing south of the Ibar River emphasize the utmost importance of this issue for the continuity of the Serbian presence in Kosovo. In contrast, within the northern region of Kosovo, 77.5% of respondents share a similar viewpoint, reflecting a considerable yet slightly lower percentage compared to those in the southern municipalities dominated by Serbian populations. This disparity suggests that a significant portion of Serbs inhabiting enclaves sustain their livelihoods in Kosovo predominantly due to budgetary contributions from Serbia.

4.1.3 Institutional solution based on ethnic affiliation or territory? Or both?

The foreseen administrative framework of Serbian community autonomy is the Association/Community of municipalities with a Serbian majority, A/ZSO agreed upon as part of the Brussels Dialogue. However, the implementation of this agreement is still pending, which has left the Serbian community in Kosovo straddling two systems that do not mutually acknowledge each other – the Serbian and the Kosovo systems. To this day, there is uncertainty regarding the structure of A/ZSO, primarily due to the discrepancies between the agreed-upon powers for the Association/Community and the existing constitutional constraints defined by the official interpretation of the Kosovo Constitutional Court⁶⁵.

Irrespective of party rotations, the Kosovo Government has consistently asserted that the Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities (A/ZSO), akin to any other constitutionally sanctioned union of municipalities, is a formal coalition of local self-governing entities. This primarily alludes to structured alliances of local bodies, a customary arrangement found in nearly all European nations. These entities advocate for municipalities' interests vis-à-vis the central authority. Typically, such associations are amalgamated, representing municipal unions at the national level, and they do not spring from ethnic considerations. According to the interpretation of the Constitutional Court of Kosovo, the proposed A/ZSO is incongruent with the existing Constitution as it explicitly entails establishing a coalition of municipalities based on the ethnicity of its residents, thereby infringing on Article 3.1 of the Constitution, which underlines Kosovo's multi-ethnic nature.

⁶⁵ https://gjk-ks.org/wp-content/uploads/vendimet/gjkk_ko_95_13_ang.pdf

More complex in nature is inter-municipal cooperation, a form of collaborative interactions among municipalities. Inter-municipal cooperation is established among one or more municipalities to achieve common goals and interests concerning the exercise of their individual and expanded jurisdictions. This type of cooperation can take the form of single-purpose, focused on a specific activity, or multi-purpose, involving a diverse range of tasks.

Several countries, including the Netherlands, Switzerland, Norway, France, Hungary, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic⁶⁶, and more, employ models of inter-municipal collaboration featuring an extensive array of exclusive responsibilities, etc. These encompass water and waste management, transportation,⁶⁷ and transit, urban planning decisions, public lighting, emergency services, environmental preservation, tourism growth, economic and cultural development, sports infrastructure, medical services, occasionally even social welfare, and an increasingly wide spectrum such as public policy, security, animal protection, mining, and energy management. Comparable constraints on inter-municipal collaboration are present in various countries, mirroring similar arrangements. For instance, municipalities in Austria, Germany, and Switzerland encounter limitations when establishing joint entities if they are not part of the same region or canton due to regional or cantonal subsidiary legislations. In France, public inter-municipal institutions must maintain a singular nature and are not permitted to include any enclaves.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that associations of municipalities and inter-municipal cooperation structures are creations of national legislative frameworks⁶⁸ rather than products of bilateral accords, a distinction that sets them apart from the Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities (A/ZSO) established under the Ahtisaari Plan. Adding to this, the 2013 agreement acknowledges the "distinctive character" of the A/ZSO, a designation that underscores the criteria for collective action – predominantly Serbian-majority – thus aligning the A/ZSO model closely with concepts of ethnic autonomy.

The concept of an autonomous institutional framework catering to ethnic minorities finds precedent across Europe, notably demonstrated by Belgium, Finland, and Italy, which stand as notable instances of what is often termed non-territorial autonomy. These arrangements, unlike the territorial-based autonomy models, extend autonomy to ethnic or linguistic groups. Achieving such frameworks usually involves protracted negotiations spanning sometimes decades as well as detailed implementation procedures, culminating in bilateral agreements between interested nations. For instance, in Finland, the Åland Islands possess the authority to grant regional citizenship and legislate on matters such as education, culture, the preservation of historical heritage, healthcare, medical services, environmental conservation, industrial promotion, local transportation, municipal governance, law enforcement, postal services, radio, and television. In Belgium⁶⁹, beyond the federal administration, three distinct Community governments – Flemish, French, and German-speaking – wield legislative powers encompassing culture, education, healthcare, and international relations within their respective domains. Similarly, in Italy, the autonomous province of Bolzano/Bozen (South Tyrol) enjoys considerable financial autonomy, retaining a majority of revenue from services and taxes across a wide array of domains.

⁶⁶ Council of Europe. (2007). Good Practices in Inter-Municipal Cooperation in Europe. Retrieved from: <https://rm.coe.int/t/680746dea>

⁶⁷ This means that the responsibilities once entrusted to an authority established through inter-municipal cooperation can no longer be carried out by municipal bodies. (Editor's note).

⁶⁸ Indeed, Kosovo already has a Law on Inter-Municipal Cooperation.

⁶⁹ Division of powers. (2008, March 11). U: European Committee of the Regions. Visited on August 21, 2023: <https://portal.cor.europa.eu/divisionpowers/Pages/Belgium-Introduction.aspx>

Arguably, the most compelling case in favor of autonomy for the Serbian community stems from the fact that it is already in place. The ongoing processes of institution-building in the predominantly Serbian-inhabited areas of Kosovo have never reached completion, resulting in a heavy reliance on Serbia for fundamental services like healthcare and education. The Serbian educational and healthcare systems operate entirely beyond the confines of the Kosovo institutional framework, functioning under significantly distinct organizational models. As a result, they inherently embody autonomy in practice. While Kosovo authorities view these systems as running in parallel and thus illegitimate, the Serbian community perceives the fact that they are managed by the Government of Serbia as an immensely crucial element in preserving their cultural identity and achieving the desired level of service quality.

In this context, it's important to highlight the community's recognition of a gradual deterioration in the quality of services provided by these institutions. These negative trends are widely attributed, almost unanimously, to the corruption and nepotism prevalent among the political elites of the Kosovo Serbs, resulting in a consequential brain drain. Nonetheless, there exists a prevailing apprehension about potential changes and their influence on the existing service standards that might arise from a potential integration into the Kosovo system. Over the course of the last two decades, the educational and healthcare institutions in Kosovo and the Serbian institutions within the region have taken divergent developmental trajectories. Nowhere is this contrast more evident than in the healthcare sector, where Serbia's approach finds its roots back to a socialist heritage and a publicly funded insurance model, while Kosovo's reliance is more heavily placed on private insurance mechanisms.

Moreover, it's important to note that the previous encounters of the Serbian community with services offered by central government institutions can hardly be deemed satisfactory. The Kosovo administrations have undergone periodic shifts, yet none in the seat have managed to showcase commendable achievements in upholding the rights of non-majority communities. An illustrative case in point is the underwhelming implementation of the Law on Use of Languages, which designates Albanian and Serbian as official languages. Equally, numerous other mechanisms aimed at safeguarding the rights of non-majority communities have faced significant setbacks. The 2022 European Commission Report on Kosovo⁷⁰ highlights that the full establishment of conditions for a truly multi-ethnic and integrated society across Kosovo is yet to be achieved. The report underscores the existing gaps in ensuring a secure environment for all non-majority communities, with particular emphasis on areas accommodating returning populations. Furthermore, challenges persist in guaranteeing access to property, personal documentation, language rights, quality education, employment, and social welfare.

Hence, the rationale for establishing autonomous powers for the Serbian community is evident. The leadership of Kosovo has not displayed sufficient responsibility or willingness to effectively implement a legal framework ensuring the protection of non-majority community rights. In light of these circumstances, seeking such safeguarding through the creation of autonomous prerogatives at the community level is not only reasonable but necessary. To ensure the effectiveness of this protection, the establishment of an authoritative body is imperative, one endowed with the ability to enact subsidiary legislation in critical areas of public policy within its recognized sphere of influence. Comparable models are present in Europe, as seen in the legislative powers held by Belgian community governments, enabling them to issue community ordinances with the authority of law within their respective jurisdictions.

⁷⁰ Kosovo* 2022. Report. Retrieved from: <https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-10/Kosovo%20Report%202022.pdf>

A similar model is indispensable for the future governing entity of the Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities (A/ZSO) in Kosovo. This framework would empower the entity to both legitimize and maintain the structural integrity and service standards, including remuneration (salary) levels within the existing institutional framework that furnishes healthcare, education, culture, and other essential services to Serbs and fellow residents of Serbian-majority regions in Kosovo.

4.1.4 Territorial Autonomy – Dual Perspectives within the Serbian Community

The model of autonomous governance encounter varying viewpoints within the Serbian community. One perspective begins with the premise that if forthcoming institutional resolutions are constructed upon existing arrangements, an asymmetrical autonomy model emerges as the most suitable choice. In this scenario, autonomy might be delimited to the four municipalities with Serbian majorities. Nevertheless, the impending institutional framework for the Serbian community (referred to as A/ZSO or by another name) will necessitate possessing the mandate to either assimilate existing educational, healthcare, cultural, and other public establishments across all Serbian-majority municipalities or establish new ones when required.

Underlying this notion is the pursuit of an autonomous model within the contours of previously established principles in negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina. Notably, these negotiations have already yielded solutions that distinguish municipalities with Serbian majorities in the north of Kosovo from those scattered in the south. One of most significant was the creation of specialized arrangements for the Regional Police Directorate -North and the implementation of an ethnic quota for prosecutors and judges within the Basic Court and Basic Prosecutor's Office in Mitrovica as well as the composition of the Appeals Panel for judicial cases arising in regions with Serbian majorities. Reinforcing this argument is the existing European practice, wherein, despite acknowledging non-territorial autonomy models,⁷ their application remains exceptionally rare.

In contrast to this viewpoint, another perspective within the Serbian community asserts that while acknowledging the unique socio-political circumstances in Kosovo, existing European practices can serve as valuable references without being restrictive in shaping a solution for the autonomy of the Serbian community. Within this context, the future self-governance framework for the Serbian community must embody uniform principles across all 10 municipalities where the Serbian community forms the majority. This principle is already embedded in the agreements establishing the Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities (A/ZSO) within the context of the Brussels process. The critical task now lies in ensuring its steadfast and coherent implementation.

When evaluating different autonomy models to find a solution acceptable to Pristina, the prospect of asymmetric autonomy, even if it appears conciliatory, could paradoxically carry greater risks. This stems from Pristina's resistance to the establishment of the Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities (A/ZSO), primarily due to concerns about potential secession. Consequently, an autonomous authority based on a framework centered around the cohesive territorial unit in northern Kosovo could be perceived as posing a more substantial risk for potential future border changes. This stands in contrast to a framework that inherently incorporates both geographically dispersed and politically fully integrated municipalities located south of the Ibar River.

Nonetheless, despite the varied viewpoints regarding the administrative format for the future self-governance institutional framework of the Serbian community in Kosovo, there are no such uncertainties surrounding its scope of authority. The Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities (A/ZSO) must, to the greatest extent possible, provide Kosovo Serbs with functional autonomy, enabling them to independently make decisions concerning the community's most critical matters. A crucial aspect of this autonomy is legitimizing the operation of educational, healthcare, and social institutions currently under the auspices of the Republic of Serbia.

4.1.5 Education, healthcare and culture

Zajednici Srba na Kosovu potrebna je međunarodno priznata institucija utvrđena u Kosovo Serbs stand in need of an internationally recognized institution firmly enshrined within the constitutions of both Serbia and Kosovo. This institution's mandate would encompass the establishment, management, and coordination of educational, healthcare, and cultural facilities within municipalities in Kosovo where the Serbian population constitutes a majority. A pivotal facet of this institutional framework should be the authority to formulate subsidiary regulations governing the operations of these institutions. The constitutional guarantees within Kosovo are necessary in order to prevent future attempts at its annulment. Similarly, in Serbia, constitutional protection is requisite to ensure sustained financial support, document validity, and unhindered collaboration with Serbian institutions. This collaborative synergy is particularly crucial for students pursuing further education in Serbia or patients seeking medical treatment there.

Within the forthcoming institutional solution, educational institutions should also possess dual accreditation from both Serbian and Kosovo authorities. The unhindered ability to pursue education in Serbia at any given moment remains a significant stability factor for numerous Serbian families. Equally crucial is the capacity to maintain educational consistency within Serbian-populated areas in terms of structure and curriculum. For instance, while the elementary school system in Serbia spans eight years, in Kosovo, it extends to nine years. Aligning Serbian schools in Kosovo with the Kosovo educational system could potentially pose challenges for Serbian students from Kosovo seeking to continue their education in Serbia, and vice versa.

The upcoming governing body under Serbs administration, opens the opportunity to establish regulations determining the minimum number of students needed to constitute a class. This measure would safeguard the functioning of schools in rural Serbian-speaking communities that fall below the minimum student-to-teacher ratio specified in the existing subsidiary regulations of the relevant ministry.

In addressing healthcare, the institution responsible for coordinating the operations of primary, secondary, and tertiary healthcare facilities should also assume the management of their budgets and enact secondary legislation. Of paramount importance, this institution should also oversee the public health fund and, furthermore, gather healthcare contributions from residents in municipalities with Serbian majorities.

Contributions to healthcare protection for public officials in municipalities with Serbian majorities should be automatic, yet not compulsory. This entails that, by default, a specific amount designated for healthcare contributions will be deducted from the

⁷⁸ Kao što su Francuska Polinezija i Farska Ostrva, oba pripadaju arhipelazima (prim.aut).

⁷⁹ Autonomija Olandskih ostrva priznata je i zaštićena i švedskim i finskim ustavom.

salaries of all public servants within finance departments across Serbian-majority municipalities and deposited into Healthcare fund. Should public servants choose not to contribute to this fund, they must request exclusion from the program through their respective financial officer. The fund should also be open to beneficiaries who reside outside areas with a Serbian majority, allowing the provision of medical services to Serbs and other Serbian citizens living beyond the A/ZSO. Beneficiaries of this healthcare fund will receive health cards, subject to regular validation and renewal, granting them access to medical care within healthcare institutions established by the governing body for Serbs in Kosovo. In addition the fund will cover the costs of medical treatment for unemployed immediate family members of beneficiaries and retired users of the Social Insurance Fund (PIO) of the Republic of Serbia. Moreover, all other citizens working in central-level institutions or the private sector, whether unemployed or residing in different municipalities in Kosovo, should also have the opportunity to become beneficiaries of this fund. They would be required to make individual contributions, while being offered the flexibility to contribute on a monthly, annual, or semi-annual basis.

Finally it is imperative that this fund maintains a legally acknowledged connection with the Republic Health Insurance Fund of the Republic of Serbia. This linkage will ensure parity in rights between the beneficiaries of this fund and those covered by the Republic Health Insurance Fund in Serbia. Furthermore, granting the Republic Health Insurance Fund in Serbia the ability to subsidize the fund overseen by the governing body for Serbs in Kosovo is equally essential.

In order to ensure equity among taxpayers and other publicly funded entities, any operational costs exceeding the standards stipulated by Kosovo laws for education, healthcare, culture, and other systems in Serbian-majority municipalities must be financed from sources distinct from municipal budgets or the Kosovo government's funds. Subsidies from Serbia or non-public resources should cover all utility expenses.

In addition, the governing body should be empowered to initiate, oversee, and synchronize the operations of cultural institutions, encompassing museums, theaters, libraries, media outlets, and radio stations. This initiative holds potential to address the existing gap where an autonomous public broadcaster in the Serbian language remains absent in Kosovo. Currently, the public broadcaster Radio Television Kosovo (RTK) provides only one Serbian-language channel, RTK2, which operates under the auspices of RTK's management bodies.

Envisioned as part of its framework, the governing body should incorporate inspection entities tasked with monitoring adherence to its secondary legislation. Furthermore, compliance with primary legislation could be feasible, with the delegation of authority to central entities. This comprehensive approach would span a diverse array of sectors, ranging from healthcare and education to environmental protection, labor regulations, construction standards, food safety, and beyond.

4.1.6 Challenges of Dualism

The upcoming autonomous body offers a opportunity to harmonize inconsistencies arising from institutional dualism, such as services simultaneously provided by Serbian and Kosovo systems. This practice is most prevalent among social assistance beneficiaries who, due to the lack of communication between the Kosovo and Serbian systems, in some cases obtain social benefits in both systems, thus creating social inequalities that do not align with the aspirations of creating a just society that safeguards the rights of all individuals. The governing body for Kosovo Serbs, recognized

⁸⁰ Mađarska daje subvencije za obrazovanje svog manjinskog stanovništva u Srbiji. Mađarska vlada ima inicijative i programe za podršku obrazovanju etničkih Mađara koji žive van Mađarske, uključujući i one u Srbiji. Ove inicijative imaju za cilj očuvanje i promociju mađarskog jezika, kulture i obrazovanja mađarske manjine.

by both Kosovo and Serbia, could utilize these information to ensure a more efficient and equitable allocation of resources. It would need to adopt and fund its own social welfare scheme, which, during the transitional phase, would take over social welfare recipients from the Serbian system, providing them with financial stability and preventing potential reductions in social benefits. The amounts disbursed as social assistance and the criteria for qualifying as a social assistance recipient in Kosovo and the Serbian system differ significantly.

Initiating a social welfare scheme, the governing body would lock the roster of beneficiaries in the Serbian system on the day of its establishment. It would then sustain the disbursements at the existing rate until the beneficiaries meet the criteria valid on the day they were granted the status. Additional ad-hoc or ongoing social welfare initiatives could also find adoption and funding through subsidies, particularly those targeting child and parental support. The social welfare schemes subsidized by Serbia should cater to all Serbian citizens in Kosovo, regardless of their municipality of residence.

There are additional societal anomalies that the governing body of Kosovo Serbs, particularly its anticipated committees or councils in line with the current negotiation framework, should take into consideration and prioritize for resolution:

- Harmonization of the labour market and education system
- The issue of meritocracy
- Creation of a credit fund to enhance the competitiveness of enterprises in areas with Serbian majority
- Provision of free legal assistance to Serbian citizens in Kosovo struggling with property rights claims
- Formation of a multi-party delegation to represent Serbian interests in meetings with the international community, investment funds, etc.

Finally, the governing body should also facilitate the formation of sports associations with dual accreditation in both Kosovo and Serbia. Members of these associations should be granted the opportunity to compete in leagues at their corresponding levels, whether in Kosovo, Serbia, or both countries.

Furthermore, the governing body must actively work to prevent any potential political polarization or marginalization of smaller municipalities with a Serbian majority. This implies that all infrastructure projects financed through the shared budget should either incorporate an inter-municipal dimension or be distributed proportionally among the member municipalities.

4.1.7 Protection measures

Since its declaration of independence in 2008, Kosovo has been striving to build a multi-ethnic society with robust power-sharing mechanisms based on the Ahtisaari Plan. However, this journey has encountered challenges, revealing systematic efforts to limit the effectiveness of these mechanisms. Notably, in 2018, the principle of double-majority which requires a vote two-thirds majority of non-majority community representatives for any changes of the Constitution, was bypassed. Indicatively, the Kosovo Parliament pass legislation extending the mandate of the Kosovo Security Force and initiating their transformation into a force focused on defending Kosovo's sovereignty, citizens, and territory. Although subsequent constitutional changes remained unattempted due to the necessary support of non-majority representatives, these laws have, nevertheless, redefined the framework withough legally binding consent of non-majority communities.

Similarly, throughout the decade of negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina facilitated by the EU, many commitments made by Pristina have not been upheld. Beyond the vital milestone of establishing the Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities (A/ZSO), there are additional examples of smaller, yet for confidence-building process, important measures. Notably, Article 10 of the First Agreement on the Normalization of Relations outlined the creation of a specialized panel within the Court of Appeal in Pristina, comprising mainly judges of Serbian nationality, tasked with handling cases in all municipalities with a predominant Serbian population. The trial involving Ivan Todosijević, a prominent figure from the Srpska Lista, who was convicted and sentenced for incitement of ethnic hatred and hate speech, has been affected by the breaches of this article. The consistent application of this article could have facilitated more equitable judicial resolutions in cases of ethnic sensitivity and beyond.

In the context of potential implementation of an agreement involving the governing body, it becomes imperative to consider the need for robust protective measures for the Serbian community in Kosovo. This consideration gains even more significance if the establishment of such a body is preconditioned by the accession that constitute a certain form of recognition of Kosovo independence by Serbia.

Among the plausible protective measures, one notable approach could entail an evaluation of the Kosovo's commitment and adherence to the agreed-upon terms, spanning a period of ten years. Upon the completion of this period, assuming all prerequisites are met, the prospect of formalizing bilateral relations between Kosovo and Serbia could be initiated.

As an additional protective measure, the final agreement could include specific rescission measures. These measures would serve as an effective deterrent against parties failing to fulfill their assumed obligations.⁷⁴ On the other side, the governing body of the Serbian community should possess a structured and unhindered right to subsidies from Serbia, in addition to the grants received from the central authorities in Pristina, to effectively carry out its designated responsibilities. It is imperative that the extent and frequency of this support be predetermined and unalterable, rather than subject to the discretion of the governing parties. This approach is crucial for the governing body to offer the Serbian community the essential attributes of institutional predictability and stability, aligning with the themes introduced in the initial discussion.

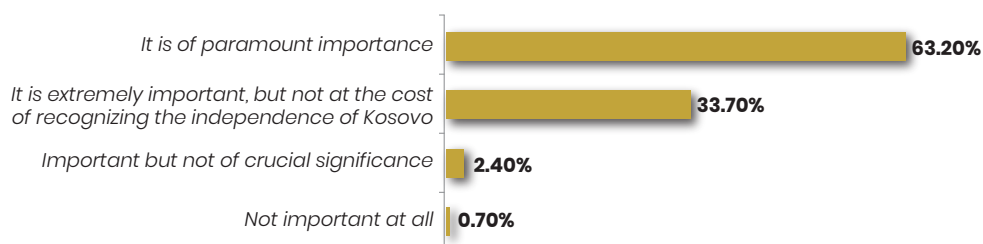
4.2 The security of the Serbian community in Kosovo

(Elek Bojan)

If we proceed with the assumption that the Serbian national interest in Kosovo is the preservation of the Serbian ethnic community's continuous existence, then the security of this community becomes one of the fundamental prerequisites for achieving that interest. The notion of security for ethnic communities within the socio-political context of Kosovo is a multifaceted concept that extends beyond the mere physical safety of its members. It encompasses a broader societal context in which the community can thrive, move freely, engage in economic activities, access education, foster social interactions, safeguard its cultural heritage, avail services, and much more. The importance of security in terms of enhancing the quality and sustainability of the community's life has been underscored by respondents in a survey conducted as part of this research. The findings reveal that as many as 97% of the participants consider the issue of security for the Serbian community to hold immense significance in retaining the presence of Serbs in Kosovo. Furthermore, nearly two-thirds of them view the security of the Serbian population as a pivotal determinant for the community's enduring continuity.

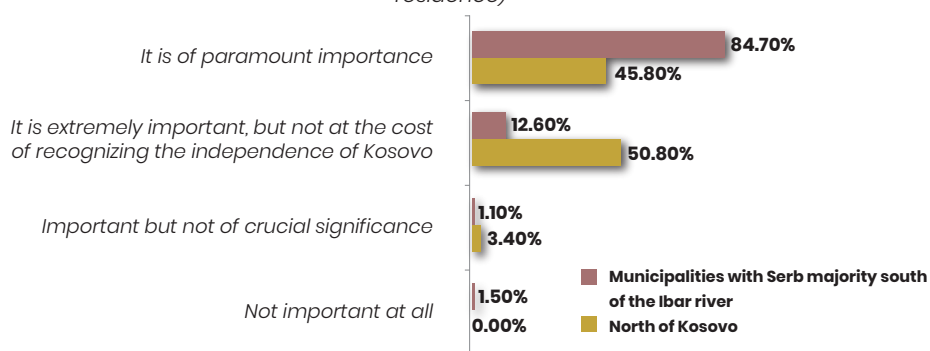
⁷⁴ Autor ovog dela studije ovde sugerise mogućnost potencijalnog referenduma za odvajanje opština za severu Kosova u slučaju značajnih kršenja sporazuma.

Graph 19 – Distribution of respondents' answers to the question: "How essential is the physical security of Serbs in Kosovo as a precondition for Serbs to remain in Kosovo?"



Nonetheless, the perspectives diverge among the respondents. Approximately 33.7% of them assert that security is indeed crucial, but not at the expense of Serbia recognizing Kosovo's independence. This viewpoint is particularly pronounced in the northern region of Kosovo, where more than 50% of the population holds this stance (Refer to Graph below). This outcome can be interpreted as a manifestation of considerable resistance within the Serbian community in northern Kosovo to make concessions on the matter of Kosovo's status, even in exchange for the assurance of enhanced security. Conversely, in the northern part of Kosovo, the issue of status is predominantly considered unresolved. Recognizing Kosovo's independence is seen as an act that could potentially dismantle the established practice of "living within two systems." This, in turn, is projected to intensify feelings of insecurity and a sense of being subjected to the authorities in Pristina. In contrast, respondents residing south of the Ibar River, comprising approximately 85% of the sample, overwhelmingly emphasize the critical nature of this question in securing the continuity of their community. This inclination aligns with the local geo-political reality—the Serbian population in the southern areas of Kosovo resides within enclaves, surrounded by an Albanian majority where, given the prevalent occurrence of ethnically motivated attacks, persistent pressures, and looming threats, the very prospects of their perseverance in Kosovo appear profoundly uncertain.

Graph 20 – Distribution of respondents' answers to the question: "How essential is the physical security of Serbs in Kosovo as a precondition for Serbs to remain in Kosovo?" (by place of residence)



The notion of security, while inherently broad and capable of encompassing facets ranging from international considerations to economic and environmental factors, takes on a much narrower significance within the context of the perseverance of the Serbian community in Kosovo, as emphasized in this text.⁷⁵ Approaching this issue through the lens of the classic Baldwinian questions that dissect various dimensions of security, particularly relevant—and perhaps even paramount—within the context of this text are the following three inquiries: security for whom, security for what values, and security from what threats.⁷⁶ The continuation of this study offers answers to these questions, aiming to provide insights that could enhance the understanding and conceptualization of the security of the Serbian community in Kosovo.

⁷⁵ Ejodus, F. (2012). *International Security - Theories, Sectors, and Levels*. Belgrade: Official Gazette and Belgrade Center for Security Policy.

⁷⁶ Baldwin, D. (1997). *The Concept of Security*. *Review of International Studies*, Number 23: pp. 5-26.

4.2.1 Security: For whom, for what, from what?

Considering the security context, the object of security here is the ethnic Serbian community—comprising both those living to the south and north of the Ibar River in Kosovo. While distinctions arise due to diverse security challenges between the Serbs residing in the four predominantly Serbian municipalities in the northern region and those in the municipalities situated to the south of the Ibar River, a fundamental assumption underscores the importance of safeguarding the presence of Serbs wherever they call home. Consequently, despite their territorial separation and the varying security and political dynamics, they are regarded as a unified ethnic entity.

The response to the second question, which values security should protect, boils down to the simple physical perseverance of the Serbian community in Kosovo, which stands as not only the foremost but also the core value.⁷⁷ At this point, it's imperative to grasp that perseverance goes beyond the physical realm. It also entails ontological security—ensuring the preservation of the Serbian identity and a profound sense of belonging within the Serbian community in Kosovo.⁷⁸ This leads us to the response to the third question: What are the threats that jeopardize the perseverance of the Serbian community in Kosovo? In essence, it encompasses what and whom the Serbian community needs protection from. This question is also the most intricate, contingent on both the objective security situation on the ground and the subjective perception of threat among individuals in their respective environments. As a result, it warrants a more detailed exploration in the subsequent sections of the text.

4.2.2 Greatest security threats, risks, and challenges of the Serbian community in Kosovo

The foremost consideration when it comes to the perseverance of minority communities anywhere in the world is their relationship and vulnerability to the majority group and this holds for the Serbian community in Kosovo, where the central issue revolves around the vulnerability of the majority Albanian population. This concern remains significant whether the threat is real and immediate, such as the 2004 pogrom, or perceived as a potential future event, as seen in the anxiety among the Serbian community in northern Kosovo following recent actions by the Kosovo Special Police. Despite the number of interethnic incidents plummeting over time, signaling improved relations between the two communities, the crisis triggered by the license plate situation in 2021 increased the fear among Kosovo Serbs.

This can be observed through surveys within the Serbian community as well. In 2020, 70% of Serbs in northern Kosovo rated the security situation as unfavorable. In the subsequent two years, this percentage escalated to over 80%.⁷⁹ This is, in fact, significantly higher than in the Serbian community located south of the Ibar River, where approximately 50% of the population consistently rates security with a poor grade. The same research also points to a highly negative trend, wherein over half of the Kosovo Serbs anticipate a deterioration in the conditions for their perseverance in the upcoming period. Conversely, only a single-digit percentage of them believe that the situation in Kosovo is moving in a positive direction.

Despite the prevailing sense of insecurity, it's interesting to note that Kosovo Serbs share almost identical concerns with their Albanian counterparts. Findings from a late 2022 study reveal that both communities are primarily preoccupied with economic challenges and unemployment, with approximately 50% expressing worry in this regard. However, what stands out is the distinction in their secondary concerns.

⁷⁷ In other parts of this study, other topics are addressed that can also be considered values being protected, such as political autonomy or economic development; however, the author does not engage with them in this text.

⁷⁸ Ejdlus, F. (2020): *Crisis and Ontological Insecurity: Serbia's Anxiety over Kosovo's Independence*. Palgrave Macmillan.

⁷⁹ Trend Analysis: Attitudes of the Serbian Community in Kosovo, November 2022, 2021, 2020. Aktiv, North Mitrovica.

For Kosovo Serbs, interethnic issues rank as the second most significant concern (19%), a substantially higher percentage than among Kosovo Albanians (merely 4%).⁸⁰ This illuminates the complexity of the perceived sources of insecurity, as "others" play a role but not the predominant one. These insights also underscore the ongoing view of Kosovo as a multi-ethnic society within both communities, albeit slightly more pronounced among Kosovo Albanians (83%) than Kosovo Serbs (74%).⁸¹

Research has revealed a significant level of concern within the Serbian community regarding the departure of young individuals from regions with Serbian populations. There is also apprehension stemming from issues caused by crime and corruption.⁸² From a long-term perspective, one of the key threats to the perseverance of the Serbian community is the emigration of its population. Driven by insecurity, uncertainty, and a range of challenges, only every other Serbian individual envisions themselves in Kosovo five years from now, with the lowest proportion found among the youngest demographic.⁸³ The course of those migration trends is characterized by Serbs from the southern regions of Kosovo moving to the northern municipalities. Alongside this, there is a noticeable trend of emigration, particularly among the younger demographic, towards Serbia.

4.2.3 Institutional Solutions for the Security of the Serbian Community

Taking into account the legal and institutional framework in Kosovo as the baseline, with the achieved agreements within the Brussels Dialogue seen as a "building upon" approach, including the latest agreements derived from the Franco-German proposal, there exist favorable conditions to establish an appropriate security arrangement that would safeguard the continued presence of the Serbian community in Kosovo. While the situation has become complex following the withdrawal of Serbs from Kosovo institutions in the north, it is imperative to undertake short-term measures to stabilize the situation. Looking ahead, a long-term focus must be placed on constructing security institutions that cater to the needs of all Kosovo citizens, encompassing the local Serbian population as well.

First and foremost, ensuring the participation of Kosovo Serbs in the police force and reestablishing normal operations at the four police stations within the regional command for northern Kosovo is of utmost significance. The inclusion of minority communities in the police force is a recognized international standard for upholding democratic policing. This practice fosters trust, bolsters the institution's legitimacy within minority groups, and enhances the interaction between the police and civilians.⁸⁴ Taking into account the absence of local Serbian police officers in the north since November 2022, the question of their potential return becomes a complex issue fraught with challenges. Foremost among these challenges is the delicate matter of trust between these officers and central authorities, given their refusal to comply with orders and subsequent portrayal as loyal to Serbia in the public eye. Should a reintegration effort be pursued, it would need to be executed voluntarily, and the essential amnesty of returning police personnel by Pristina would be imperative. However, this presents a formidable political challenge, as the current context differs significantly from when a Law on Amnesty was enacted in Kosovo back in 2013 as part of the Brussels Agreement. Additionally, it's worth noting that in February, the Kosovo police initiated a recruitment process to fill vacant positions for members of minority communities, which garnered applications from approximately 140 individuals.⁸⁵ Although this illustrates a continued "boycott" of Kosovo institutions by the local community, some positions will be filled, potentially leaving no room for the return of all the police officers who left the Kosovo Police Force.

⁸⁰ Balaj, S. and Sejdiu, G. (2022): What are the Kosovo Citizens' Perceptions on Inter-ethnic Relations: Fostering Inter-ethnic Relations and Reconciliation Survey Result. Pristina: Kosovo Centre for Security Studies.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Trend Analysis, 2022, Aktiv. Retrieved from: <https://ngoaktiv.org/aktiv-publikacije/>

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Peyton, K.(2022): Beliefs about minority representation in policing and support for diversification. PNAS, vol. 119, No. 52.

⁸⁵ Insufficient Interest in Police Positions in Northern Kosovo. (February 13, 2023). Radio Free Europe.

To provide the context, the 2013 Brussels Agreement foresaw, among other things, the disbandment of existing units of Serbian police and their integration into the Kosovo Police Force. This integration was to be accompanied by the creation of a new regional command overseeing the four municipalities in the north. However, the implementation of this integration, which began in 2014, encountered its fair share of challenges despite initial optimism. The process unfolded in a rush and lacked effective communication with the local population.⁸⁶ Over the course of nearly a decade since the establishment of an integrated police force in the north, the security situation hasn't shown significant improvement. This period has been marked by a substantial number of unresolved cases involving attacks on individuals and private property. Undoubtedly, the most traumatic event for the entire Serbian community remains the unresolved murder of Oliver Ivanović in January 2018. Additionally, the occasional deployment of Kosovo's special police forces among the Serbian population, primarily in the northern areas, triggers significant apprehension. Their intimidating presence is compounded by the fact that these forces lack any representation from the local community.

Secondly, while KFOR remains the principal guarantor of peace and stability, it's essential to consider the Serbian community's perspective on the Kosovo Security Force (KSF). While the KSF doesn't possess the characteristics of a full-fledged military and operates under a narrower mandate, it's significant to note that a process to gradually transform the KSF into an army, or defense force, was announced in 2018, with a projected timeline of the next 10 years.⁸⁷ Although Serbs had been engaged in the KSF and the available data indicated a total of 130 members up to 2018, the announcement of the force's transformation into an army led to a massive departure of Serbs from the service, allegedly by the insistence of Serbian authorities.⁸⁸ Although the hesitation of Kosovo Serbs to join the KSF is understandable, given the history of conflicts and the symbolic role attached to the military, it's imperative to consider the long-term scenario. This scenario involves the eventual departure of KFOR from Kosovo and the transformation of KSF into an army. In this context, ensuring the representation of the Serbian community becomes of paramount importance.

Thirdly, it cannot be overlooked that the attitude of the Serbian community towards the presence of international forces in Kosovo holds significance as well, given that these forces also play a role in the security landscape. While an in-depth analysis of each actor is beyond the scope here, it's important to note that the perception of EULEX among local Serbs tends to be more negative compared to KFOR and UNMIK. This divergence in perception is attributed to the understanding that the European Union mission is often seen as a contributor to Kosovo's independence and state-building efforts. In contrast, KFOR and UNMIK, operating under mandates outlined in UN Security Council Resolution 1244, are viewed as a tenuous connection to Serbia and as remnants of its sovereignty over Kosovo, albeit indirectly.⁸⁹ Despite lacking executive authority, EULEX's presence remains visible within the northern Kosovo Serbian community. This presence stems from its years-long role in mentoring, supervising, and advising, including support provided to the local police post the 2014 integration. When considering the long-term outlook, it's important to recognize that international missions, despite their potential to extend for decades (similar to the UN mission in Cyprus), will eventually depart Kosovo once circumstances allow. Consequently, it becomes imperative to establish a resilient system before their departure to ensure the security of the local Serbian population.

⁸⁶ Bjeloš, M. & Elek, B. (2014). Police Integration in Northern Kosovo: Progress and Remaining Challenges in the Implementation of the Brussels Agreement. Belgrade Centre for Security Policy and Kosovo Centre for Security Studies.

⁸⁷ Qehaja, F. & Illazi, R. (2021). Busting Myths about KSF Transition into Defence Force. Pristina: Kosovo Centre for Security Studies.

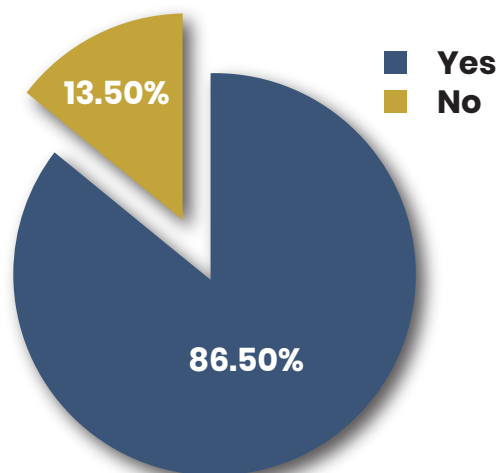
⁸⁸ Bala, S. & Boshnjaku, T. (2018). Multiethnicity Destruction Tendencies: Massive Resignations of Serbian Members from the Kosovo Security Force and Serbia's Role. Pristina: Kosovo Centre for Security Studies.

⁸⁹ Batora, J. et al. (2018). The EU and International Actors in Kosovo: Competing Institutional Logics, Constructive Ambiguity, and Competing Priorities. Oslo: Comenius University and NUPI.

Finally, the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo, as two distinct political entities (regardless of how this relationship is defined in international law), is of paramount importance for the security of the Serbian community. There exists a direct link between the escalation of political tensions and on-the-ground incidents. This relationship, often characterized as a security regime, continues to be marked by persistent tensions, the fear of violence, and the potential for large-scale conflict. The nature of the relationship between the political representatives of Serbian and Albanian societies is just one facet of a far more intricate dynamic. Within this complex interplay, there is an imperative to mitigate tensions and promote the principles of trust-building and reconciliation among ethnic communities in Kosovo. The actors in this process are diverse and extend beyond politicians to include media, academic circles, civil society, the business sector, and others. Each holds a role and responsibility in fostering a stable social environment in Kosovo, one that encourages cooperation, and dialogue, and fosters mutual economic, cultural, and ultimately, political collaboration among communities.

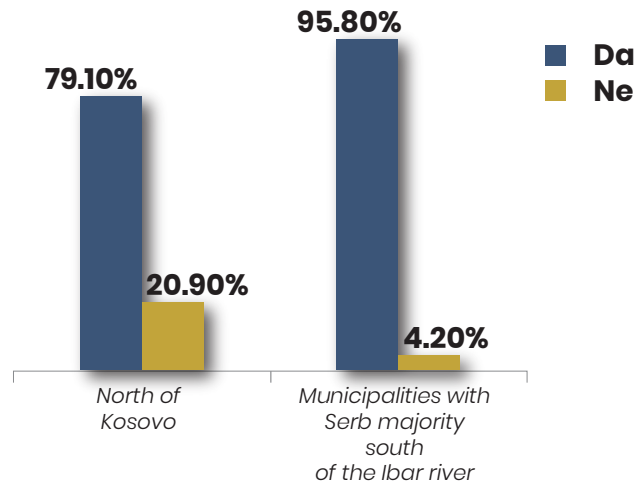
The significance of reconciliation between ethnic communities in Kosovo for the stability and security of the Serbian community in the region is acknowledged by the participants of this study. As much as 86.5% of the respondents believe that reconciliation is in the interest of the Serbian community in Kosovo.

Chart 21 – Distribution of respondents' answers to the question: "Do you consider reconciliation with Albanians (establishing peace and mutual tolerance) to be in the interest of the Serbian



Examining the data by the respondents' places of residence reveals slight disparities between the southern (95.8%) and northern (79.1%) communities. Nevertheless, these differences do not significantly deviate from the core finding of this study: the overwhelming majority of Kosovo Serbs consider the reduction of ethnic tensions and the fostering of reconciliation between communities as crucial prerequisites for their continued existence.

Graph 22 – Distribution of respondents' answers to the question: "Do you consider reconciliation with Albanians (establishing peace and mutual tolerance) to be in the interest of the Serbian communities?" (according to the place of residence).



4.2.4 How to ensure security?

Envisioning a scenario where the Serbian community in Kosovo can thrive without external intervention hinges on a critical premise: the departure of international mission representatives from Kosovo and the eradication of interethnic conflict as a conceivable threat for both Kosovo Albanians and Serbs. This hypothetical situation signifies that Kosovo society has reached a level of maturity where harmonious coexistence among diverse groups becomes a viable reality even without foreign oversight and security assurances. While this scenario might seem difficult to imagine at present, especially in the wake of recent events involving Kosovo's special police units, KFOR, and local Serbs following local elections in the northern region, the analysis presented above guides us toward contemplations on how to progress in pursuit of this envisioned outcome.

In addressing the matter of the police, an immediate priority lies in the urgent need to restore normalcy to the operations of the police force in northern Kosovo and facilitate the reintegration of Serbian police officers. Subsequently, efforts should focus on establishing measures to foster trust. This entails fostering trust not only between the central authorities and the police officers of the regional command in the north but also with the local community. Looking ahead, the long-term objective should extend beyond mere representation on paper. It should encompass the actual potential for integration by dismantling barriers such as language limitations and impediments to career advancement.⁹⁰ In conclusion, it's essential to explore models for the engagement of specialized police forces in coordination with local authorities based on agreements, while also implementing measures to ensure the presence of minority communities within these units and to foster trust-building. This is particularly crucial following recent actions that have been perceived as biased and repressive.⁹¹

Several constitutional and other legal protection measures stipulate that police work in non-majority areas should be carried out by units reflecting the ethnic composition of the community in which the police operate. The continuous presence of special police units in northern Kosovo largely undermined the trust in the Regional Police

⁹⁰ Elek, B (2020). Policing in North Kosovo after the Brussels Agreement. Pristina: Balkans Policy Research Group.

⁹¹ International Police Standards: Guidebook on Democratic Policing. 2009. DCAF, Geneva, p. 25.

Concerning the Kosovo Security Force (KSF), which is set to evolve into the future armed forces of Kosovo, it is particularly important to ensure that the participation of minority communities is voluntary. It is crucial to avoid the introduction of mandatory military service, as there has been speculation about this in the public discourse of Kosovo recently.⁹² On top of this being in contradiction with NATO's approach that prioritizes a professional military force, which Kosovo aspires to join, it would also have a detrimental impact on interethnic relations. Additionally, it is crucial to guarantee that Serbs who wish to enlist in the KSF can do so without jeopardizing their safety.

Finally, when it comes to international security guarantees and the relations between Serbia and Kosovo, the only sustainable long-term strategy is European Union membership. The European Union has played a pivotal role in reconciliation and the transition from a conflictual relationship. Last but not least, concerning international security assurances and the dynamics between Serbia. Through the accession of both Kosovo and Serbia to the EU, the current security framework would advance into a higher stage of collaboration – a security community embodying a model of security interdependence where the use of force is neither anticipated nor prepared for in their interactions.⁹³ In addition, the EU integration of Kosovo and Serbia would offer a pivotal solution not only for the region's stability but also for the ongoing presence of NATO and international forces. Should the necessary conditions be met, this scenario would signify the viability of the Serbian community's continuation in Kosovo, their safety assured, and the potential for a harmonious coexistence between Serbs and Albanians.

Directorate North (RPD North) and the overall interethnic relations in Kosovo. As early as the end of 2021, representatives of civil society organizations warned about the danger of marginalizing the authority of RPD North in favor of single-national special police units, stating that such actions would lead to "fostering confrontation and further ethnic polarization," bringing the region closer to "an open conflict of unimaginable proportions in an unstable security environment." Therefore, it should be carefully considered to extend the requirement for Serbian community representation beyond regular security forces to include special police units as well.

4.3 Economic empowerment of the Kosovo Serb community

(Jakovljević Jovana)

4.3.1 Overview of the Economic Status of the Serbian Community in Kosovo

Despite the efforts of the Serbian community to build a more prosperous life within the post-1999 war context, the unresolved ethnic conflict and ongoing political tensions remain central concerns in both Kosovo and Serbian societies, sidelining the imperative of economic and social advancement. These trends unavoidably shape a societal atmosphere in which sustainable economic growth is either markedly hindered or nearly entirely halted. The tensions stemming from the process of normalizing relations and the partial integration of Serbian institutions into the Kosovo system, coupled with frequent political crises⁹⁴, have further contributed to the creation of unfavorable conditions for the economic development of the Serbian community.

The research carried out by the Institute for Territorial Economic Development (InTER) in 2021 reveals that microenterprises are predominant in Serbian communities in

⁹² Sejdiu, G. (2023). Is Compulsory Military Service Feasible for Kosovo? Kosovo Centre for Security Studies, Pristina.

⁹³ Sekaric, 2021, p. 137.

⁹⁴ These result, for example, in the imposition of tariffs on imports of goods from Serbia and reciprocal trade measures by Kosovo.

Kosovo, with trade emerging as the dominant economic activity, followed by agriculture, hospitality, and other service-related sectors.⁹⁵ Only in recent years, there has been a mild upswing in the construction industry, largely driven by increased investments in municipal infrastructure and public projects such as schools, hospitals, roads, and other essential facilities. Viewed in light of the existing natural resources and capacities, agriculture, along with the hospitality or tourism sector, emerges as a propulsive economic sector capable of providing employment and income to the population. However, these sectors also demand systematic investments in infrastructure, facilities, equipment, and skilled personnel. Nevertheless, stable and resilient sources of financing within the economy have not been identified in Serbian communities. Additionally, the presence of international donors is insufficient, as past investments have not catalyzed the development of communities, especially in rural areas where agriculture dominates the economic landscape.

With a fragmented structure of the private sector and a devastation of large state-owned or socially-owned economic systems in Kosovo, which were once generators of economic development and new job opportunities, the Serbian community nowadays largely relies on employment within the public sector. This includes institutions established under the Kosovo constitutional and legal framework, as well as those in the Serbian system that continue to operate within Kosovo's. Tens of thousands of individuals from the Serbian community are employed in these institutions⁹⁶, with the budgets of both the Pristina and Belgrade governments allocating tens of millions of euros annually to sustain their operations.⁹⁷

Over the course of many years, the official authorities in Belgrade have pursued strategies aimed at bolstering the economic well-being of the Serbian community. This approach has centered around maintaining or increasing the number of positions within the public sector and institutions aligned with the administrative and legal framework of the Republic of Serbia. The allure of job security, above-average earnings, and affirmative employment policies within these institutions has led to the widespread societal aspiration in the Serbian community known as the "government job," a concept synonymous with individual and family economic stability. This strategic orientation has engendered a reliance on the public sector within the Serbian community in Kosovo, consequently resulting in systematic neglect of private sector growth and the associated advantages it brings.⁹⁸

The strengthening of the public sector as the primary strategic approach for ensuring the economic security of the Serbian community, however, has not been guided by measures of economic sustainability and profitability. Instead, it has been driven with the primary goal of creating positive demographic trends and preventing or slowing down the departure of Serbs from Kosovo. Consequently, this approach has led to the development of a robust but inflexible public sector, burdened by an excessive workforce and progressively diminishing efficiency due to its exclusion from developmental initiatives and intermittent public sector restructuring projects undertaken in Serbia. The expansion of the public sector in Kosovo has experienced a slowdown over the past decade due to fiscal consolidation and public administration restructuring policies pursued by the Serbian government. These measures included the termination of certain public enterprises in Kosovo, a limitation on available job positions, and wage freezes. However, the absence of a strategic push toward private entrepreneurial development has resulted in the perpetuation of a prevailing pattern of economic sustainability for the Serbian community, heavily reliant on the public

⁹⁵ Based on data from economic entities registered in the Kosovo legal system.

⁹⁶ In 2017, there were 12,700 employees in public institutions and institutions of the Republic of Serbia only in the municipalities in northern Kosovo. Source: InTER (2017). Public Institutions and Institutions of the Republic of Serbia in Northern Kosovo: What future awaits us?

⁹⁷ There are no precise data available about the total investment by the Republic of Serbia.

⁹⁸ Detailed budget reports for the Republic of Serbia from 2008 to 2021.

sector. This dependence has been further compounded by the gradual integration of the Serbian community in the north into Kosovo's constitutional and legal framework, leading to the creation of a considerable number of public positions funded through the Kosovo budget. Despite these shifts, unemployment remains persistently high⁹⁹, as the public sector, despite its robustness and institutional dualism, falls short of accommodating the substantial pool of unemployed individuals.

Exploring avenues to bolster the economic prospects of the Serbian community in Kosovo reveals a critical imperative: the strengthening of the private sector and the cultivation of a conducive business environment. However, this pursuit is confronted by a complex web of socio-political factors, predominantly rooted in the current socio-political position of the Serbian community in Kosovo. Paramount among these factors is the persistent ethnic conflict, a reality that curtails the potential for prolific interethnic cooperation in the realm of private entrepreneurship and creates formidable barriers to the expansion of markets for businesses within the Serbian community. Working within confined markets, often encompassing no more than 10,000 residents, entrepreneurs originating from the Serbian community grapple with the inherent limitations of the microenterprise model, (only 5 to 10 employees), adapting its operations to the needs of restricted demands of the local market. Furthermore, the intrusion of political dynamics—more precisely, the resonance of political tensions into other sectors of society—exerts a profound impact on the business environment that enterprises affiliated with the Serbian community navigate.¹⁰⁰ Additionally, the de facto division within Kosovo society and the partial integration of business entities from the Serbian community, as a consequence, substantially hinder access to central-level support programs and, more crucially, restrict access to fresh capital for the development of the private sector.

Cumulatively the combination of these limiting factors has a substantial impact on the growth potential of the private sector within the Serbian community in Kosovo. When compounded by the absence of a strategic development plan and the presence of high levels of corruption and misuse in state-sponsored initiatives aimed at fostering private sector growth (topics that will be explored further in the subsequent sections of this study) it becomes evident that the existing socio-political dynamics in Kosovo do not foster a conducive setting for the continued economic empowerment of the Serbian community.

4.3.2 The role of Belgrade and Pristina in the economic development of the Serbian community

Ever since the launch of the Brussels process aimed at normalizing relations between Belgrade and Pristina, attempts were made to identify efficient mechanisms for a more rational, effective, and expedited socio-economic advancement of the Serbian community in Kosovo. Within this context, one solution emerged in Brussels in 2013 through the establishment of the institutional framework known as the Association/Community of Serbian Municipalities (A/CSM), encompassing municipalities predominantly inhabited by Serbs in Kosovo. This envisioned entity was set to wield authority over critical domains like education, healthcare, social welfare, urban and rural development, as well as local economic growth. Such a socio-political structure for the Serbian community could potentially yield substantial benefits, facilitating a structured and strategic implementation of developmental policies. The value of this proposition isn't solely in its consolidation of a significant portion of the Serbian community under a unified administrative structure. It also lies in the premise that the

⁹⁹ UNDP Kosovo (2019). Public Pulse XVI. Retrieved from: <https://www.undp.org/kosovo/publications/public-pulse>

¹⁰⁰ NGO CASA interview with a businessman from Gračanica whose products, despite international awards for quality, have not managed to optimally penetrate the broader Kosovo market.

establishment of the A/CSM would grant it legitimacy within the Kosovo system, thereby mitigating a substantial portion of administrative and legal obstacles that hinder institutional support for Serbs residing in Kosovo.

As the agreement of the establishment of the Association/Community of Serb Majority Municipalities (A/CSM) has never been implemented, Serbia has continued with its established practices of financing remaining public institutions and investing in public infrastructure. Furthermore, it has also, to some extent, extended financial support to empower the economic potential of the Serbian community and foster the development of the private sector. The available data from the final budget account laws of the Republic of Serbia spanning from 2008 to 2021 underscore significant allocations directed towards Kosovo. Beginning at 52.3 million euros in 2008, these allocations have shown a steady increase, reaching a substantial sum of 124.2 million euros by 2021. It is important to acknowledge that the figures outlined in the final budget account documents provide only a partial representation of Serbia's financial contributions. The task of accounting for indirect investments that lie beyond the confines of budgetary allocations, such as investments and expenses related to public enterprises, presents a notable challenge.¹⁰¹

During the presentation of the Office for Kosovo report in the Serbian Parliament in late 2022, President Aleksandar Vučić revealed that the financial investments from the national budget for Kosovo amount to approximately 750 to 800 million euros annually.¹⁰² In April 2023 alone, the Government of the Republic of Serbia adopted a package of measures to protect the rights of Serbs and other non-Albanian populations, as well as vital state and national interests, amounting to 28 million euros.¹⁰³ The package entails the continuation of investments in the socio-economic advancement of Serbian communities, along with the establishment of a specialized investment program designed to expedite the infrastructural development of these regions and enhance financial assistance for businesses, farmers, youth, and vulnerable social groups. However, the existing development programs that will be integrated into this package and the precise details regarding agricultural support, as well as the specific infrastructure projects encompassed by the investment program, are currently undisclosed.

In parallel to direct budgetary subsidies, which encompass salaries for employees within institutions operating under its administrative-legal system, Serbia, through the initiation of negotiations and the achievement of agreements for the normalization of relations in Brussels, has set forth a substantial wave of investments in Serbian municipalities from various funding sources. Consequently, over a span of three years, an amount exceeding 32 million euros has been injected into municipalities in northern Kosovo, distributed across 249 distinct projects¹⁰⁴. The very same process the Brussels Agreements, also led to the establishment of local administrations in northern Kosovo following the Kosovo constitutional-legal system, thus paving the way for access to development funds from the Pristina budget. Additionally, the negotiation process resulted in the establishment of a significant instrument for the ongoing financial support to the Serbian community in northern Kosovo—the so-called Development Fund of Municipalities in Northern Kosovo. By the end of August 2016, this fund had accumulated over 9.4 million euros from customs revenues from Jarinje and Brnjak crossings. The Fund supported more than 22 projects in Serbian communities in northern Kosovo, ranging from infrastructure projects to initiatives fostering the private sector. However, concerning this financial support instrument, it has become evident that a greater focus has been placed on the distribution of available funds

¹⁰¹ Serbia doubled its expenditures for Kosovo since the declaration of independence. (February 20, 2023). Radio Free Europe. Retrieved from: <http://bitly.ws/ISTs>.

¹⁰² Where does the money that Serbia invests in Kosovo end up? (August 14, 2022). Radio KiM. Retrieved from: <https://www.radio-kim.net/vesti/politika/gde-zavrsava-novac-koji-srbija-ulaze-na-kim.html>

¹⁰³ Statement of the Government of the Republic of Serbia. Retrieved from: <https://shorturl.at/istU2>

¹⁰⁴ INTER (2016). Are We Living Better? Effects of Financial Assistance to Northern Kosovo after the Brussels Agreement.

rather than the developmental outcomes that financing aims to achieve. Funds were collected and allocated through projects until Pristina's decision to impose tariffs on imports of Serbian products significantly impacted the revenue stream. Afterward, there are no official updates on the Fund's condition and its activities, which is an indicator of the unsustainability and vulnerability to political events of support mechanisms for the economic empowerment of the Serbian community. Resuming this Fund's operations and fostering new development projects hold significant significance for the Serbian community in northern Kosovo. Nevertheless, the Fund's viability largely relies on achieving stable relations between Belgrade and Pristina, along with ensuring unobstructed movement of goods, capital, and services.

Political barriers of the same nature significantly impact the limited access of individuals and entrepreneurs from the Serbian community to incentive programs created by the Kosovo government. These barriers include a lack of information (due to inconsistent language implementation of the law), a non-affirmative approach by the Kosovo government in assuring the involvement of the Serbian community in employment-increasing initiatives¹⁰⁵, and inconsistent implementation of legal and constitutional provisions regarding the proportional participation of non-majority communities in the distribution of public resources¹⁰⁶. As a result of these practices, only a very limited number of businesses within the Serbian community can qualify for the incentive programs established by the Kosovo government. This is exemplified by the COVID-19 Fiscal Assistance Package that the Kosovo government implemented in 2020, where out of 30,000 companies that received financial aid through this program, only 2.6% were registered in municipalities with a Serbian majority¹⁰⁷. The actual percentage of businesses owned by Kosovo Serbs is likely even lower, as a significant number of companies owned by Kosovo Albanians are also registered in these municipalities.

4.3.3 The lack of a strategic approach and transparency in developmental initiatives

Existing data indicates significant financial resources are allocated for the Serbian community from the budgets in both Belgrade and, to a lesser extent, Pristina. However, the reported scale of investments, considering the size of the Serbian community, fails to yield substantial and observable outcomes¹⁰⁸. What's concerning is the scarcity of public information regarding the utilization of designated funds, the criteria for project selection, the execution process, and, most critically, the achieved effects and results. The lack of transparency in fund allocation raises suspicions of corruption and favoritism, casting doubt on whether a significant portion of the funds might be siphoned back to Serbia through corrupt practices¹⁰⁹.

Numerous voices from both Kosovo Serbs and Serbia's independent political circles have been alarmed by the misuse of funds and the selective allocation based on party membership, in addition to various forms of unauthorized fund utilization. In particular, opposition figures in Serbia have been sounding the alarm about the existence of numerous "phantom projects"¹¹⁰, in which funds allocated from the budget of the Republic of Serbia are purportedly presented as expenses for constructing production facilities in Kosovo, yet no such installations, factories, or

¹⁰⁵ Characteristics of an Open Society in the Serbian Community (2021). Pristina: KFOS.

¹⁰⁶ Constitution of Kosovo, Article 59 (10-11), Rights of Communities and Their Members.

¹⁰⁷ InTER (2021). Analysis of the Economic Situation in Serbian Communities in Kosovo. Pristina: KFOS.

¹⁰⁸ Where does the money that Serbia invests in Kosovo end up? (August 14, 2022). Radio KiM. Retrieved from: <https://www.radio-kim.net/vesti/politika/gde-završava-novac-koji-srbija-ulaze-na-kim.html>

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ In Gračanica, a chicken farm was built with an investment of 2 million euros, but it cannot be found anywhere. In Laplje Selo, a cold storage facility was constructed for 150 million dinars, yet it is nowhere to be found. The funds intended for building a hospital in Gračanica were transferred to the account of the Provisional Authority, but there is still no project for constructing that hospital, and citizens are being treated in containers. Source: Tatjana Manojlović: Corruption another name for SNS, many examples in Kosovo and Metohija. (February 25, 2023). Kossev portal. Retrieved from: link

infrastructure investments are present on the ground. The impact of politics on the private sector becomes evident even within the local economic landscape, as businesses owned by socially active and critical individuals face a myriad of challenges, ranging from deliberate administrative obstacles to market entry¹¹³ to occasional instances of property and equipment damage¹¹².

The oppositional leaders from areas south of the Ibar River have emphasized the disparities in the distribution of funds from both Pristina and Belgrade, favoring the Serbian community in northern Kosovo¹¹³. A stark illustration of this trend is the allocation of around one million euros from the Kosovo Ministry for Communities and Returns budget for urban facade renovations in Mitrovica, diverting attention from the construction of returnee houses in the southern regions of the Ibar River¹¹⁴.

The undeniable fact is that investments from various funding sources have somewhat improved the quality of life for citizens in Serbian communities in Kosovo. However, evident shortcomings in the outcomes of different investments in the Serbian community indicate that the issue lies not in the extent of investments, but rather in the manner of their distribution, misuse, and the treatment of public resources as partisan spoils. On the other hand, political tensions between Belgrade and Pristina not only create an unfavorable environment for economic activities but significantly limit the Serbian community's access to support programs offered by central Kosovo institutions. These tensions even cast doubt on the functionality of numerous institutions within the administrative system of the Republic of Serbia that employ a significant number of citizens in Serbian communities. Adding to this are the growing negative migration trends, the departure of many young people in search of employment and better educational opportunities, and the "exodus" of professionals from various fields. These factors have a sensitive impact on the labor market. In this context, it can be stated that the economic security of the Serbian community is endangered and calls for new and more responsible approaches by those in positions of responsibility.

4.4 Education in the Serbian community in Kosovo as a reflection of the overall social situation

(Jovičić Dušica)

As part of the research process into the national interests of the Serbian community in Kosovo, participants were encouraged to expand their discussions beyond the confines of structured interviews. This approach led to a deeper examination of the issue of education, as it became evident that a quality educational system plays a pivotal role in the social and economic development of the Serbian community which in turn, holds the potential to encourage Serbs to continue residing in Kosovo.¹¹⁵ Interviews also affirmed a key point highlighted in the youth migration case study – the subpar state of education serves as a primary driver for the departure of young individuals. Given these insights, it is imperative to provide a specific focus on the condition of the educational system within the Serbian community in Kosovo. Such scrutiny is not only essential but also a fundamental prerequisite for understanding the migration problem that threatens the sustainability of the Serbian community. Furthermore, it is vital to craft recommendations that, in theory, could improve the quality of education and positively impact the decisions of Serbian community members regarding their continued residence in Kosovo.

¹¹³ Owner of "Joe Travel": They are prohibiting me from organizing school trips, I am forced to leave the North. (March 4, 2023). Kossev portal. Retrieved from: <https://kossev.info/vlasnik-joe-travel-zabranjuju-mi-da-vozim-skolske-ekskurzije-primoran-sam-da-napustim-sever/>

¹¹² Two buses of the company "Joe Travel" damaged. (July 11, 2022). Goraždevac. Retrieved from: <https://www.gorazdevac.com/2022/07/11/ostecena-dva-autobusa-firme-joe-travel/>

¹¹³ Where does the money that Serbia invests in Kosovo end up? (August 14, 2022). Radio KiM. Retrieved from: <https://www.radio-kim.net/vesti/politika/gde-završava-novac-koji-srbija-ulaze-na-kim.html>

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ A significant number of interlocutors believe that it is necessary to grant autonomy to the education system in the Serbian community in Kosovo in the negotiation processes as an important prerequisite for the survival of Serbs in Kosovo.

The educational system within the Serbian community in Kosovo operates based on the curriculum provided by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia. It is frequently described as the cornerstone of Serbian identity and intellect, highlighting its political role, while overshadowing its fundamental purpose – the transmission of knowledge and the upbringing of children.¹¹⁶ Over the past decade, there has been a significant intensification of a process that gained momentum with the ascent of the Srpska Lista to power and a shift in Belgrade's policy towards northern Kosovo. In broader social terms, this transformation translated into prolonged internal political conflicts and tensions, paralleled by stagnation in social and economic development. When we take into consideration that the state of education often mirrors the general social climate, it becomes evident that the educational system has entered a state of anomie in the last ten years. As such, it has become increasingly susceptible to the pervasive politicization of social life, gradually drifting away from its core mission. This perspective on Kosovo's educational system not only explains why it has failed to act as a catalyst for social development, as it inherently should but also allows us to conduct an analytical examination of the challenges it currently faces.

In addition, research findings consistently point to the inadequate state of education as the primary driver behind the emigration of young individuals from Kosovo. This further reinforces the argument regarding the critical role of a quality educational system in preserving the Serbian community's presence in Kosovo. Through conversations with key figures in the education sector, three overarching categories of educational challenges have come into focus: infrastructure issues, corruption, and the general deterioration of the educational system. At the heart of these challenges lies the politicization of education, acting as the fundamental catalyst for the unchallenged growth of these problems.

4.4.1 The issue of infrastructure

After the 1999 war and the division of the University of Priština into the University of Priština located in its original city and the University of Priština with a temporary seat in North Mitrovica, the buildings where Serbian students pursue their studies are scattered across various locations in northern Kosovo. This infrastructural challenge has resulted in a shortage of spatial capacities within the University. However, this issue isn't unique to higher education. The problem of inadequate space, along with insufficient facilities for teaching, is a common issue across all levels of education – from elementary to secondary and tertiary.¹¹⁷ For instance, the building where classes are conducted at the Faculty of Natural Sciences and Mathematics also serves as the premises for the High School, Technical School, and Vučitrn/Vushtri Gymnasium. Most faculties, like the Faculty of Philosophy, share their premises with other faculties, such as the Faculty of Philology, and utilize spaces that are not adequately equipped for both theoretical and experimental teaching. Consequently, limited spatial capacities pose hindrances to the educational and scientific activities of these faculties. A comparable situation has been identified in elementary and secondary schools, which number 120 and 33, respectively, throughout Kosovo.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Political representatives of the Serbs in Kosovo, as well as representatives of the University, use this phrase as an argument against the integration of the education system into the Kosovo system. More details at:

<https://www.rts.rs/lat/vesti/politika/3460619/srbi-sa-kosova-nema-kompromisa-oko-univerziteta.html>

<https://www.kosovo-online.com/vesti/politika/simic-obrazovanje-i-zdravstvo-najjaci-stubovi-opstanka-srba-na-kosovo-i-metohiji-28>

¹¹⁷ The solution to the issue of spatial capacity is seen in the construction of the University Center, which commenced in 2021 and is financed by the Republic of Serbia through the Office for Kosovo. This project is intended to provide the Natural Sciences and Mathematics, Economic, Law faculties, as well as the Rectorate, with their own premises for both theoretical and practical instruction. More details can be found at:

<https://www.kosovo-online.com/vesti/drustvo/vitosevic-uz-novu-zgradu-postajemo-regionalni-univerzitetski-centar-10-6-2021>
<https://www.kosovo-online.com/vesti/drustvo/radojevic-kosovska-mitrovica-grad-mladih-i-univerzitetski-centar-11-5-2022>

¹¹⁸ The data was obtained from the website of the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development.

<https://opendata.mps.gov.rs/>

The absence of well-equipped and suitable educational facilities raises fundamental questions about its quality for both students and educators. Extensive research has revealed a direct link between inadequate learning environments and a host of detrimental outcomes¹¹⁹ including lower academic performance and diminished student achievements. Moreover, these substandard conditions jeopardize the basic right to education for young individuals, elevating the infrastructure issue to one of paramount importance in the realm of education within the Serbian communities in Kosovo.

4.4.2 The issue of corruption

Corruption, defined as the exploitation of public authority for personal benefit¹²⁰, presents a wide array of manifestations within the educational landscape, spanning a spectrum of illicit activities. In terms of perceived prevalence, corrupt employment practices stand as the most prominent, particularly within the elementary and secondary levels of Kosovo's education system. Meanwhile, bribery-related corruption takes the forefront within the realm of higher education.

Corrupt employment practices, primarily observed at lower levels of the education system, encompass activities that involve the exchange of money for job positions, as well as various forms of nepotism and cronyism. Research conducted in northern Kosovo highlights the significant prevalence of corruption within the education sector.¹²¹ These practices undermine the principles of equality and fairness in the hiring process. Currently, the legislative framework allows school directors discretionary authority in candidate selection, lacking a clear set of criteria to regulate the teacher recruitment process. This lack of transparency and legal ambiguity creates an environment conducive to corrupt practices. Moreover, school directors are appointed and removed by the Minister of Education, and their terms are not limited, making this a crucial point where educational politicization and corruption intersect as major concerns.¹²²

Corruption in employment has immediate consequences, favoring 'preferred' candidates at the expense of competent and qualified individuals. This practice not only violates the meritocratic principles of society but also indirectly erodes the education system. Unqualified and inadequately trained educators undermine the educational infrastructure from within, as they lack the essential skills for effective teaching. This situation also discourages young individuals with the potential to contribute to the education system. The issue becomes more intricate since specific professions, such as teachers in subjects like chemistry, physics, and biology, face a shortage of qualified candidates, and the enrollment numbers in these study programs are steadily decreasing. This raises pertinent questions regarding the composition of the future teaching staff in Serbian communities in Kosovo¹²³. Concerning higher education, one of the most prevalent forms of corruption is the practice of 'buying' grades and diplomas. This practice carries significant negative consequences for the education system within the Serbian community. Many individuals obtain higher education degrees without the corresponding level of knowledge and competence.¹²⁴ Research on the quality of education has shed light on the extent of this problem, revealing that every tenth person has either paid for an exam or knows someone who has engaged in such practices.¹²⁵

¹¹⁹ Research on the effects of inadequate school infrastructure is abundant, but Brennan delved deeper into this issue, highlighting the possibility of social unrest as the ultimate consequence of this problem.

Branham, D. (2004). The Wise Man Builds His House Upon the Rock: The Effects of Inadequate School Building Infrastructure on Student Attendance. *Social Science Quarterly*, 85(5), 1112–1128.

¹²⁰ Mijatović, M., & Pejanović, D. (2018). Understanding Corruption in Scientific Theory, International UN and EU Documents, and the Practice of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Institute for Serbian Culture – Priština, Leposavić.

¹²¹ <https://acdc-kosovo.org/sr-latn/vesti/najvise-korupcije-u-mitrovici-u-obrazovanju-policiji-i-euleksu>

¹²² A paradigmatic example of corrupt practices in Kosovo is the director of 'Sveti Sava' Elementary School in Klokot, who held the position of school director for more than three decades and employed his entire family as teachers and staff in the school.

¹²³ <https://www.vreme.com/vreme/podmazivanje-radnog-mesta/>

¹²⁴ The shortage of teaching staff is recognized within the academic community as a significant problem with long-term consequences. <https://www.euronews.rs/srbija/drustvo/54051/stvarno-ne-znam-ko-ce-raditi-u-skolama-na-studije-za-nastavnika-hemije-u-novom-sadu-prijavio-se-samo-jedan-kandidat/vest>

¹²⁵ Ivić, I., Pešikan, A., & Kostić, A. (2021). Key Data on Education in Serbia. Belgrade: Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts.

¹²⁶ Results of the research on the quality of education in northern Kosovo can be found in more detail at <https://ngoaktiv.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/kvalitet-obrazovanja-na-severu-Kosova.pdf>

4.4.3 The general deterioration of the education system

Among the range of issues that can serve as indicators of the deterioration of the education system, notable factors include the devaluation of knowledge, widespread erosion of the reputation of the teaching staff, and poor student performance on high school graduation and international assessments.

Devaluation of Knowledge: Research conducted by the NGO CASA has shed light on the issue of knowledge devaluation among younger generations¹²⁶. It has been revealed that young individuals do not perceive knowledge as an inherent value but rather assess it solely based on its utilitarian worth. Education, to them, represents a mere tool that enables competitiveness in the job market. Such instrumentalization of knowledge suggests that education is no longer viewed as a societal value but as personal human capital offered in the labor market.

The General Erosion of the Teaching Staff's Reputation: Within the Serbian educational system, a significant proportion of teachers in primary and secondary schools do not have permanent full-time positions¹²⁷. This has created challenging social and economic conditions for these educators, further compounded by their limited autonomy. The practice of school directors being appointed directly by the Minister of Education, without fixed terms, has created opportunities for the exploitation of educational professionals¹²⁸. These practices not only jeopardize the integrity of the education system but also affect its quality. Higher education, which enjoys greater autonomy, is somewhat less susceptible to such pressures. Additionally, there is a concern regarding the quality of the teaching staff, stemming from corruption in the employment process, as individuals may be politically favored but lack the necessary qualifications, resulting in subpar student performance.

Poor Student Performance: It has been assessed that, at present, grades no longer serve as a reliable indicator of academic achievement, a fact underscored in the report by the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts for the year 2020. Within the school system, there exists a grade inflation, with approximately 14% of the total student population receiving Vuk's Diploma, an honorary distinction. Conversely, the performance of Serbian students in both national and international assessments has been steadily deteriorating. Approximately 50% of fifteen-year-olds within the same system demonstrate functional illiteracy¹²⁹ indicating their limited comprehension of the subjects they study in school, and highlighting the impractical nature of the knowledge they acquire.

In summary, the current state of education reflects the culmination of various factors, all stemming from the politicization of the educational landscape. This situation is, essentially, an indirect consequence of this overarching process. It leads us to a sobering realization: education within the Serbian communities in Kosovo serves as a pivotal political pillar. Unfortunately, both its educational and developmental aspects have been overshadowed, and the young generation is not regarded as the most critical human resource within this community. The three primary issues we've identified—infrastructural challenges, corruption concerns, and the systemic deterioration of education—are intertwined and, when examined together, present a comprehensive portrayal of the educational system within the Serbian communities in Kosovo.

¹²⁶ Jovičić, D., & Marinković, M. (2023). Youth Migration from Kosovo: The Case of the 2020 Generation. Pristina: KFOS.

¹²⁷ Ivić, I., Pešikan, A., & Kostić, A. (2021). Key Data on Education in Serbia. Belgrade: Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts.

¹²⁸ When discussing the misuse of teaching staff for political purposes, interlocutors have drawn attention to practices such as mandatory participation in elections and rallies organized by the President of Serbia, as well as the use of coercion and threats if this is not done. There is not enough official information available about these illegal practices.

¹²⁹ Ivić, I., Pešikan, A., & Kostić, A. (2021). Key Data on Education in Serbia. Belgrade: Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts.

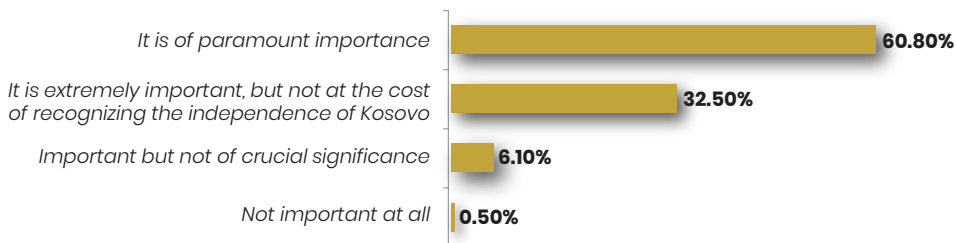
4.5 The Protection of Cultural Heritage and the Position of the Serbian Orthodox Church

(Surlić Stefan, Asistent profesor at the Faculty of Political Science in Belgrade)

The issue of cultural heritage protection and the position of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) holds significant importance for the Serbian community in Kosovo. These matters are deeply intertwined with the national identity, not only of the Serbs residing in Kosovo but also of the broader Serbian population. It is estimated that Kosovo is home to approximately 1300 churches, monasteries, sites, and spatial complexes of cultural heritage significance¹³⁰. Although it has been more than two decades since the conflict in Kosovo, these sites are still subject to deliberate harm, theft, and vandalism, as highlighted by numerous international monitoring mechanisms. Certainly, the enormity of this issue in terms of its impact on the process of normalizing relations between Belgrade and Pristina, as well as its role in fostering trust among the diverse communities in Kosovo, cannot be overstated. International mediators have duly acknowledged its significance, a fact underscored by the explicit reference to the Serbian Orthodox Church's position within point 7 of the German-French proposal, subsequently rebranded as the European Union Plan. With this in mind, the ensuing paragraphs are dedicated to shedding light on the pivotal role that religious and cultural heritage plays in safeguarding the Serbian national interest in Kosovo. verske i kulturne baštine za očuvanje srpskog nacionalnog interesa na Kosovu.

The results of the research conducted for this publication reveal that Kosovo Serbs view the preservation of the cultural-historical heritage and spiritual legacy of Serbs in Kosovo as either crucial or of exceptional significance for the perseverance of the Serbian community. This sentiment garners an impressive 93% of collective support among the surveyed population.

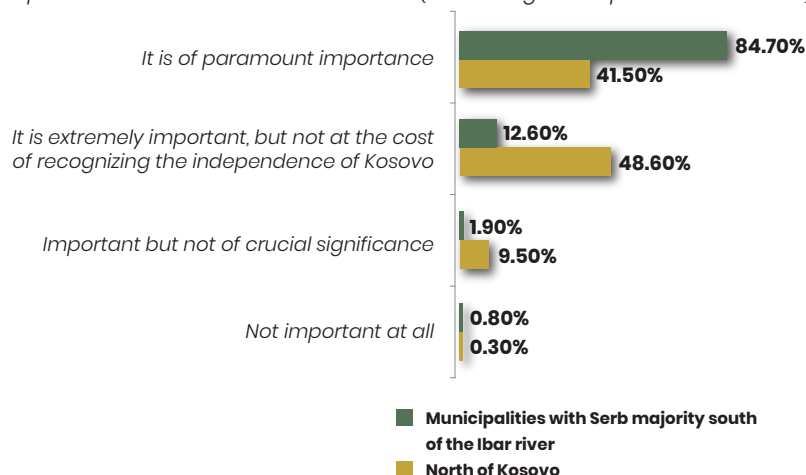
Chart 23 - Distribution of respondents' answers to the question: "To what extent is the protection of the cultural-historical heritage and spiritual legacy of Serbs in Kosovo a fundamental prerequisite for Serbs to remain in Kosovo?"



Taking into consideration the distribution based on the place of residence, it becomes apparent that the matter of safeguarding the cultural-historical heritage and spiritual legacy of Serbs in Kosovo holds varying degrees of importance. This variance is particularly notable among Serbs living south of the Ibar River, where many are centred around monasteries and cultural landmarks. Their decision to remain in Kosovo is often intertwined with a sense of mission to preserve their spiritual and cultural identity. Among Serbs from the northern part of Kosovo, a subtle difference emerges: 41.5% believe that the protection of the cultural-historical heritage and spiritual legacy of Serbs in Kosovo is crucial for their continued presence, while 48.6% deem it of exceptional significance.

¹³⁰ According to the data of the Government of Serbia. Retrieved from: <https://www.kim.gov.rs/lat/kulturno-nasledje.php>

Graph 24 – Distribution of respondents' answers to the question: "How essential is the protection of the cultural-historical heritage and spiritual legacy of Serbs in Kosovo as a fundamental prerequisite for Serbs to remain in Kosovo?" (according to the place of residence).



Similar outcomes are reflected in other research as well. For instance, the findings from the NationalS study conducted in 2022 reveal that citizens of Serbia were most aligned with the following national interests: ensuring the physical safety of Serbs in Kosovo and their ability to live and work without hindrance (73.1%), safeguarding the cultural-historical heritage and spiritual legacy of Serbs in Kosovo (65.8%), along with preserving the Orthodox monasteries. (68.1%).¹³¹

Despite the normative framework defined by Annex 5 of the Ahtisaari Plan for the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) and Serbian religious and cultural heritage, the practical application since 2008 has revealed numerous deficiencies and shortcomings in the envisaged protection mechanisms. Therefore, the need for a new model is evident. Kosovo has thus far demonstrated an absence of full willingness to uphold its laws and the Ahtisaari framework, including the freedom of movement for church personnel and court judgments safeguarding the property rights of the Church.

Building upon Annex 5 of the Ahtisaari Plan, any future proposal should serve as an enhancement, as the devised mechanisms have not fully ensured the protection of the special status of the Church and cultural heritage. The past practice of Kosovo institutions has led to the conclusion that any new model for heritage protection should exclude the possibility of arbitrary actions by the authorities in Pristina. The longstanding institutional practice in Pristina has been fueled by an extreme discourse that fundamentally holds a discriminatory attitude towards the cultural identity of the minority Serbian community in Kosovo. Such a practice should be completely prevented by the new model.

The all-encompassing plan, when integrated into Kosovo's existing legal framework, must deeply consider the preservation of cultural identity, historical continuity, and the canonical ties between the Eparchy of Raska-Prizren and the Serbian Orthodox Church's Patriarchate, which has its profound historical roots in Pec. The unhindered protection of property rights, religious liberties, economic arrangements, customs, and other provisions is indispensable to ensure the effective functioning of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Additionally, a system of safeguarded zones should persist to guarantee the proper implementation of these measures.

¹³¹ How citizens perceive the national interests of Serbia. Retrieved from: <https://nationals.rs/kako-gradani-vide-nacionalne-interese-srbije/>

Despite the majority of these demands being outlined in the Ahtisaari Plan, the recent period has highlighted several specific issues that a future comprehensive agreement should address. Firstly, certain provisions of the Ahtisaari Plan have been overseen. Secondly, some provisions are legally regulated but not enforced. Thirdly, certain provisions are subject to incorrect or ambiguous interpretation. Fourthly, certain crucial matters are not covered by either the Ahtisaari Plan or the existing legal framework in Kosovo.

Several illustrative examples highlight these issues. Article 1.6 of Annex 5 defined that the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo has complete discretion in managing its property, reconstructing its assets, and accessing its premises and buildings. However, this provision has not been incorporated into the constitutional and legal framework in Kosovo. There are intentions to further challenge this right of the Serbian Orthodox Church through new laws, primarily concerning cultural heritage.

Article 1.6 of Annex 5 highlights that the authorities in Pristina cannot arbitrarily prohibit the entry or stay in Kosovo of priests, novices, monks, nuns, laypeople, or other invited individuals and members of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Although this provision has been transcribed into the adopted Law on Religious Freedoms, a recent case involving the entry ban imposed on Patriarch Porfirije attests to the arbitrary implementation of the applicable norms.

The prolonged endangerment of special protected zones is elaborated more extensively in earlier analyses, and it is still persistent despite the prescribed mechanisms for resolving disputes. Most of the laws concerning cultural heritage are categorized as laws of "vital interest," but the predominant weakness still lies in the authorities' unwillingness to respect the established legal framework.

Taking into account past experiences, the foremost challenge with Ahtisaari's "package" has revolved around the implementation mechanism. Thus, should an accord be reached concerning a novel model for safeguarding the nation's cultural heritage, guarantors (presumably the EU) would hold a significant role in establishing a sustainable oversight mechanism for enforcing the agreed-upon terms.

The Ahtisari Proposal outlines that in case of disputes, the establishment of the Implementation and Monitoring Council (IMC) is proposed. This council would consist of representatives from local authorities, the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC), and international missions, with decisions made through consensus. As the decision-making process within the IMC progressed, a debate emerged over whether this body should possess executive or advisory powers. Representatives of the Government of Kosovo advocated for an advisory role, asserting the government's ultimate authority. Conversely, the SPC contended that IMC decisions should not require government approval and emphasized that the adopted decisions should carry an executive character, thereby remaining unaffected by subsequent modifications initiated by the executive branch.

The IMC mandate analysis reveals that the Government of Kosovo is obligated to ensure the implementation of the "decisions" of the IMC, rather than its "recommendations," "advice," or "opinions." This dual interpretation has effectively paralyzed the entire framework of special protection, allowing the Government of Kosovo to unilaterally position itself as the ultimate adjudicating authority in any potential dispute, disregarding the dissenting perspective of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) regarding activities within areas designated as special protected zones.

In light of several critical factors, the Serbian cultural and religious heritage in Kosovo requires a new approach. These factors revolve around the inconsistent application, ambiguous interpretations, and at times complete neglect of rights outlined in Annex 5 of the Ahtisaari Plan. Furthermore, the absence of a comprehensive legally binding framework to govern all aspects of the Serbian Orthodox Church's (SPC) rights and responsibilities within Kosovo's territory poses a significant challenge. Equally important is the lack of a robust international mechanism to effectively uphold the special status of Serbian cultural and religious heritage. Lastly, the issue of territoriality for sites that hold immense religious, cultural, and identity significance for the Serbian community and the SPC remains unresolved.

Reinforcing the current normative framework for special protected zones through the application of soft extraterritoriality is essential to prevent any practices that could jeopardize the integrity of these significant religious and cultural sites. This unique status aligns with established European models, including the Holy See (Lateran Treaty), the Sovereign Military Order of Malta, and Mount Athos in Greece, which have demonstrated their efficacy in similar contexts.

4.6 Political representation of the Serbian community in Kosovo

(Marinković Miodrag)

4.6.1 Political participation of Serbs in Kosovo institutions

The legal framework governing the involvement of the Serbian community in Kosovo's political system is characterized by its affirmative nature, akin to the legal provisions that, at least on paper, safeguard the rights and freedoms of the Serbian population in Kosovo. Aligned with the constitutional and legal parameters, a broad array of liberties and rights is extended to Serbs for their political engagement, accompanied by mechanisms that safeguard against potential domination or undue influence by the majority. According to the Kosovo Constitution, the Serbian community is entitled to 10 reserved parliamentary seats, a minimum of one ministerial position in the government, no less than two deputy minister positions, and their concerns are bolstered by the "double majority" mechanism in the parliament, ensuring that pivotal constitutional changes and impactful laws affecting the Serbian community cannot be enacted without the two-thirds endorsement of representatives from non-majority groups. Additionally, constitutional provisions ensure equitable participation of these non-majority communities in public affairs, a facet particularly manifested for the Serbian community through an extensive range of legal safeguards preserving freedom of information, media, expression, and political assembly.

The affirmative character of the legal system in ensuring equality for minority communities falls short without its consistent enforcement. This is where the pattern of relations between central authorities in Pristina and the Serbian community in Kosovo becomes evident once again, through the inconsistent and selective application of the legal framework. It seems that the Albanian community in Kosovo views the legal framework that regulates Serbian participation in governance as a hindrance to achieving their political and national objectives. Furthermore, the mechanisms intended to prevent majorization and protect the interests of minority communities are being reinterpreted to the extent that they lose their original purpose.

The most illustrative example of this is the approach of central authorities toward the initiative to transform the Kosovo Security Force into the Kosovo Army, which was proposed in December 2018. This initiative required procedural changes to constitutionally protected norms, relying on the legal mechanism of a double majority. In more specific terms, it demanded the votes of representatives from the Serbian community to modify the constitution. However, since the initiative did not receive support from the Serbian community or its political representatives, central authorities adopted inventive measures by enacting a series of laws to circumvent the necessity for constitutional amendments. By doing so, the genuine spirit of Kosovo's legal framework, particularly the legal mechanisms safeguarding the rights of minority communities, was completely marginalized. This approach not only demonstrated a discretionary attitude of Kosovo's authorities toward their legal system but also fundamentally undermined the participation of Serbs in Kosovo's institutions. The rhetoric accompanying this and similar cases further exacerbated tensions, amplifying voices in society (and the political scene) that argue that Serbs have been granted too many rights, posing a threat to the functionality of the system¹³².

The same example alerts us to another issue in the political representation of the Serbian community. Despite media indications, its political representatives in the Kosovo Parliament refrained from pursuing available remedies, including the option of filing appeals to the Constitutional Court of Kosovo to scrutinize the constitutionality of the package of laws related to the establishment of the Kosovo Security Force¹³³. While some voices argue it may be a political calculation from Belgrade¹³⁴, fundamentally, this example reflects the attitudes of elected political representatives of the Serbian community towards their engagement within Kosovo's political system. This approach is marked by a lack of active institutional participation¹³⁵ and the optimal utilization of existing mechanisms to safeguard the interests of the Serbian community in Kosovo. In short, political representatives of the Serbs in Kosovo demonstrate a lack of interest or effort in actively engaging in the roles they have secured through the electoral process.

These attitudes can be attributed to the incomplete de-stigmatization of Serbian participation in Kosovo's political life. Such forms of engagement have been considered, for many years, as acts betraying the national interests of the Republic of Serbia in Kosovo. The limited number of political parties from the Serbian community (primarily south of the Ibar River) that defied these viewpoints by participating in elections faced strong criticisms and pressures. These pressures originated both from the authorities in Belgrade and from leaders in the more politically and ethnically cohesive northern regions. The lack of support from Belgrade has negatively affected their representational character, leading these political options to occupy institutional positions in electoral processes with extremely low voter turnout within their communities. Nevertheless, these practices changed in 2012 when the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) assumed power in the Republic of Serbia, and the Brussels dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina was initiated in 2013.

¹³² Marinković, M. (2021). Characteristics of an Open Society in the Serbian Community, Pristina: KFOS. Retrieved from: link

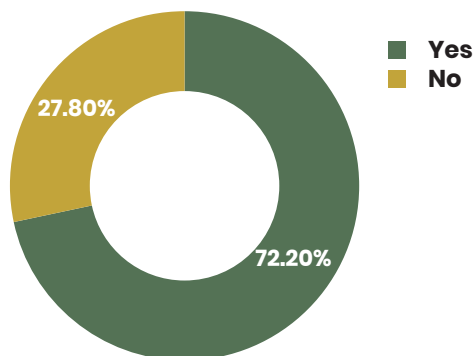
¹³³ Thaçi Declared Laws on the KSF by Decree, Serbian List Did Not Submit a Complaint. (December 28, 2018). Kossev. Retrieved from: <https://kossev.info/thaci-ukazom-proglasio-zakone-a-kbs-srpska-lista-nije-podnela-zalbu/>

¹³⁴ NI Video Archive. Retrieved from: https://www.tiktok.com/@ni_srbija/video/7173972404106972421

tions faced strong criticisms and pressures. These pressures originated both from the authorities in Belgrade and from leaders in the more politically and ethnically cohesive northern regions¹³⁶. The lack of support from Belgrade has negatively affected their representational character, leading these political options to occupy institutional positions in electoral processes with extremely low voter turnout within their communities¹³⁷. Nevertheless, these practices changed in 2012 when the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) assumed power in the Republic of Serbia, and the Brussels dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina was initiated in 2013. This dialogue marked a substantive shift in Belgrade's policy towards Kosovo. Its essential objective was to achieve mutually agreeable solutions that would enable the full integration of Serbs into Kosovo's legal and political system. As a result, the first agreement on the principles of normalizing relations established the primacy of the Kosovo legal system in all Serbian communities in Kosovo¹³⁸. Viewed from the perspective of Belgrade, this agreement delegitimized the institutions of the Republic of Serbia in Kosovo (referred to as "parallel institutions"). However, it simultaneously paved the way for Serbian involvement in institutions established under Kosovo's constitutional and legal framework. This agreement marked the initiation of a process aimed at the complete integration of the Serbian community into the Kosovo system. Today, over a decade later, active participation within Kosovo's institutions has become somewhat of a norm in the political organization of the Serbian community. Nonetheless, the destigmatization of this approach within Serbia's internal political landscape remains incomplete, as arguments centered around betraying national interests through engagement in Kosovo's governance continue to be invoked in intraparty conflicts. Under the weight of such narratives, Serbian political representatives often view their participation in Kosovo's political system as a formal necessity, translating into apologetic and passive forms of behavior.

The stance of the Serbian community in Kosovo on this matter was one of the aspects under examination in our study. According to the research findings, respondents from the Serbian community, irrespective of their diverse evaluations of the participatory approach concerning national interests, hold a substantial consensus (72.2%) in believing that their engagement in Kosovo institutions is following their interests. Refer to the graph below for a visual representation.

Graph 25 – Distribution of respondent answers to the question: "Do you consider Serbian participation in Kosovo institutions to be in the interest of the Serbian community?"



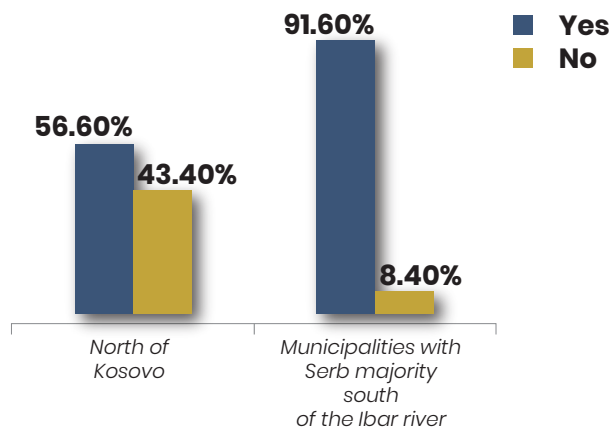
¹³⁶ Šćekić, J. (November 24, 2010). Serbian Representatives Still Divided on Elections. Radio Free Europe. Retrieved from: link

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Agreement on the Normalization of Relations Between Serbia and Kosovo from 2013, implicit references to Kosovo legislation in points 4, 7, and 10. (Editor's note).

When analyzed based on the place of residence, it becomes evident that an extremely positive stance towards participation in Kosovo institutions is held by as much as 91.6% of Serbs residing south of the Ibar River. However, respondents from the Serbian community in northern Kosovo exhibit a divided opinion; while 43.4% believe that Serbian participation in Kosovo institutions is not in their interest, a slight majority of 56.6% still perceive participation to have a positive effect on Serbian interests.

Graph 26 – Distribution of respondents' answers to the question: "Do you believe that Serbian participation in Kosovo institutions is in the interest of the Serbian community?" (by place of residence)



A two-fold conclusion can be drawn from these data. Firstly, the Serbs in the south are almost fully institutionally integrated into the system. They perceive participation not only as a necessity of the socio-political circumstances in which they live (lower community cohesion, higher degree of integration) but also been shown to be an effective way to address some of the pressing issues of the Serbian community south of the Ibar River¹³⁹. On the other hand, the incomplete integration of the Serbian community in northern Kosovo, coupled with constant confrontation with the authorities in Pristina, has led to disengagement from the institutions and resulted in a divided opinion about the actual necessity and purpose of participating in institutions within the Kosovo system.

It's necessary to highlight that the results, particularly in the context of the northern region, should be approached with caution. The survey of citizens' attitudes was conducted during a period of deep political crisis within the Serbian community in the north, which led to the organized withdrawal from Kosovo institutions¹⁴⁰. There is no doubt that this has had a considerable impact on respondents from the northern region of Kosovo. However, it is noteworthy that, despite such circumstances, the majority of respondents (56%) indicated that participation in Kosovo institutions is in the best interest of the Serbian community. In the qualitative segment of the analysis, an independent political representative from the Serbian community in the north explained this high percentage of Serbs endorsing participation in institutions, irrespective of the prevailing conditions. He attributed it to the significant worsening of the political-security situation in the north following the Serbian withdrawal from Kosovo institutions¹⁴¹.

In his view, this demonstrated the necessity of institutional engagement by the Serbian community as a prerequisite for utilizing autonomous powers.

¹³⁹ Respondent 58, Goraždevac: "I don't see a way for us to survive in Kosovo if we don't participate in the government and fight for our interests in that way." CASA NGO Archive.

¹⁴⁰ Serbs Leaving Kosovo Institutions. (November 5, 2022). Radio Free Europe. Retrieved from: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/s-rbi-napustaju-institucije-kosova/32117184.html>

¹⁴¹ Respondent 9, North Mitrovica. CASA NGO Archive.

This can, indeed, be deduced as the key takeaway from this section of the study. While the institutional engagement of the Serbian community in Kosovo may currently appear as a reluctant necessity, it holds significant potential for enhancing the community's status and safeguarding its rights and interests. Presently, there are no feasible alternatives to such involvement, and passive approaches such as boycotting electoral processes have demonstrated substantial risks to the security of the Serbian community in Kosovo¹⁴². Progressively destigmatizing this approach in the public perception could contribute to a more proactive stance by Serbian political representatives in carrying out roles within Kosovo's constitutional and legal framework. Similarly, the same outcome might be achieved through fostering authentic political pluralism within the Serbian community in Kosovo. Further insights on this matter will be elaborated upon in the subsequent sections of this study.

4.6.2 The characteristic of political engagement of the Serbian community in Kosovo

The unified political representation of the Serbian community in Kosovo has long been a sought-after concept in the realm of political engagement within a society marked by protracted ethnic conflicts. The merits of such an approach need no elaboration, as the strategic advantages it offers for safeguarding the interests of the Serbian community in Kosovo are self-evident. This becomes particularly significant when we consider that certain mechanisms devised to protect the interests of minority communities (such as the aforementioned concept of double majority) are structured in a way that demands synchronized action from the political actors representing them.

In historical retrospect, all governments in Belgrade have, to a greater or lesser extent, aspired to achieve this unity. However, concrete results have been lacking, at least to the extent that this unity could be translated into coordinated political action¹⁴³. The most significant challenge in this endeavor was crafting political platforms capable of accommodating the diverse interests of the Serbian community on both sides of the Ibar River. Political divergences between these two distinct entities within the Serbian community stem from pronounced socio-political disparities in their respective contexts. The geographically and politically homogenous North of Kosovo, for instance, long resisted integration into the Kosovo constitutional and legal system, thereby fostering a distinctly different political landscape compared to their fully integrated and more vulnerable counterparts in the southern regions of Kosovo. This political asymmetry in terms of "feasibility" posed a substantial barrier to the formation of a cohesive political initiative for the Serbs of Kosovo.

Formally observed, the current administration in Belgrade has succeeded in achieving this unity for the first time since the regime of Slobodan Milošević. This accomplishment was realized through the establishment of the Srpska Lista in 2014, a unified political entity with, from the perspective of Belgrade, the legitimacy to advocate for the interests of Serbs in Kosovo. Bolstered by comprehensive financial and logistical support, the Srpska Lista secured dominant political control in areas predominantly inhabited by Serbs in Kosovo. This consolidation enabled the centralization of institutional representation within Kosovo's institutions and a complete alignment of the political trajectory of the Serbian community with the policies and positions of the official authorities in Belgrade.

¹⁴² Reference to the deterioration of the security situation in northern Kosovo after the departure of Serbian institutions and the takeover of municipal power by the minority Albanian community. (Editor's note).

¹⁴³ We have already explained the reasons, the different socio-political realities in which Serbs south of the Ibar River objectively did not have the opportunity to follow their compatriots in the northern municipalities in resisting integration into the Kosovo system. (Editor's note).

Such a harmonization, however, has not been achieved through democratic discourse or the organic convergence of ideas and interests among diverse political actors within the Serbian community. On the contrary, it has been achieved through a forceful monopoly of the political landscape in the Serbian community, the suppression of pluralism, and the direct exertion of pressure on political opponents and their endeavors. All of these actions have been orchestrated in close coordination with and support from Belgrade. As a result, the current formal unity, prominently highlighted by the official rhetoric in Belgrade, does not genuinely mirror the multifaceted landscape of ideas and aspirations present within the Serbian community in Kosovo. Instead, it seems geared towards legitimizing the dominance of the ruling party's agenda in Serbia's political landscape, especially in the context of the Serbia-Kosovo normalization process¹⁴⁴.

The argument supporting this conclusion is the emergence of the idea of territory exchange between Serbia and Kosovo, which was jointly promoted by Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and former Kosovo President Hashim Thaçi in August 2018¹⁴⁵. This idea fundamentally jeopardized even the existential interests of the Serbian community south of the Ibar River. The plan was endorsed by the Srpska Lista¹⁴⁶ including 6 mayors in municipalities that were supposed to be left beyond the envisioned and delineated borders, despite numerous warnings that came from the ranks of independent political and civic leaders of the Serbian community south of the Ibar. There are no public records indicating that any official from the Srpska Lista in those areas opposed this plan. Furthermore, a portion of them actively engaged in campaigns discrediting critical voices, including those emanating from the Serbian Orthodox Church¹⁴⁷, thereby showcasing the supremacy of party interests over the opposing and articulated interests of the community.

This example illustrates that the strategy pursued by Belgrade through direct representatives in Kosovo, primarily the Srpska Lista, falls short in its flexibility to encompass the diverse spectrum of interests within the Serbian community in Kosovo. Moreover, it lacks the democratic robustness necessary to facilitate their unrestricted expression in the public domain. To address this, there's a fundamental requirement to establish authentic political and democratic pluralism within the Serbian community in Kosovo. This would enable the representation of varied interests and create the space for channeling these interests into a unified political platform that safeguards the welfare of the Serbian community.

The essential deficiency in the political engagement of the Serbian community in Kosovo, as well as the political leaders of the Republic of Serbia, lies in the absence of a strategic approach towards Kosovo. This is significantly exacerbated by the lack of societal consensus regarding Serbia's national interest in the Kosovo issue. Without a well-defined strategic approach, both Serbia's political course and the actions of Serbian representatives in Kosovo tend to be driven by party agendas and narrow partisan interests that shift with changes in power in Belgrade. This undermines a crucial aspect of the Serbian political landscape – the consistency of Serbia's policies. The hope for a collective strategic framework for action in Kosovo, shared among political leaders in Serbia and even within intellectual and academic circles, seems unrealistic given the current circumstances nor there are any hints of such discussions or initiatives. Adding to the complexity, the political landscape in Serbia is deeply divided and marked by intense animosities, making it unrealistic to anticipate a willingness to put aside differences and approach the Kosovo issue with the required

¹⁴⁴ Serbian List and Belgrade: History of Strong Connections. (November 27, 2018). Radio Free Europe. Retrieved from: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srpska-beograd-cvrste-veze/29623575.html>

¹⁴⁵ Vučić and Thaçi: Seeking Support for Reaching an Agreement. (August 25, 2018). Radio Free Europe. Retrieved from: <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/vucic-i-taci-u-alpbahu/29452980.html>

¹⁴⁶ Serbian List: Border Demarcation Is Not a Done Deal. (August 14, 2018). Radio Mitrovica Sever. Retrieved from: <https://radiomitrovica.sever.com/2018/08/14/srpska-lista-razgranicenje-nije-gotova-stvar/>

¹⁴⁷ Not a Traitor Since Yesterday! (August 29, 2018). Informer. Retrieved from: <https://informer.rs/vesti/politika/395712/nije-izdajnik-od-juce-sava-janjic-se-jos-2015-zalagao-da-lazna-drzava-kosovo-postane-clan-unesko>

level of responsibility needed to forge widely accepted, comprehensive, and implementable solutions. Therefore, it is imperative to demand this kind of responsibility from the authorities in power in Serbia.

A positive step toward fostering a broad societal debate on this issue could be removing the Kosovo question from the day-to-day political agendas of political entities. The relentless pursuit of power and the ideological posturing of political parties concerning Kosovo has resulted in cemented, unyielding stances on status issues, sidelining a more compassionate and "human-centric" approach that centers on developmental policies, genuine human needs, and the enhancement of quality of life. An illustrative example is the concept of an "internal dialogue," wherein President Aleksandar Vučić of Serbia instigated a broader societal discourse in the latter part of 2017 regarding potential resolutions to the Kosovo issue. This process actively engaged diverse institutions, including the academic community and civil society, aiming to explore plausible solutions to the Kosovo problem¹⁴⁸. The culmination of this effort didn't yield a clear result in the absence of an official report. Moreover, the sincerity of the invitation came into question as parallelly to this process, negotiations were underway with Kosovo's then-President Thaci concerning the prospect of territorial delineation.

The political and institutional representation within the Serbian community has been homogenized under a single political faction, namely the Srpska Lista, which, with unwavering support from authorities in Belgrade, exerts substantial influence and strong pressure on political opponents within the Serbian community¹⁴⁹. This process is further enabled by Belgrade's utilization of state-controlled media to launch smear campaigns against opposition figures in the Serbian community in Kosovo¹⁵⁰ as well as application of existential pressures, including the threat of job loss or degradation. The scale and systematic nature of efforts to marginalize political opposition within the Serbian community are evident to the extent that one can conclude that political pluralism within the community has been systematically suppressed¹⁵¹. This translates into a societal environment where freedom of expression, criticism of authorities, and open dialogue on citizens' interests are threatened, while practices of employment based solely on criteria of party loyalty are widespread.

The conclusion drawn is quite straightforward: the lack of political diversity and citizen engagement in Serbian communities across Kosovo has now reached an alarming level. This presence is so pervasive that it strongly impacts the community's potential to strive for better conditions and a brighter future within the Kosovo context.

4.7 Other important factors for the perseverance of the Serbian community

The areas that we have addressed with particular focus in this report certainly do not exhaust the list of topics of significance for the Serbian community and the creation of conditions for their dignified, productive, and sustainable life in Kosovo. Their comprehensive examination requires a much broader analysis and greater resources that were not available during the preparation of this study. However, this does not diminish their importance for the Serbian community in Kosovo.

¹⁴⁸ Serbia Initiates Internal Dialogue on Kosovo. (October 31, 2017). Al Jazeera Balkans. Retrieved from: [source] <https://balkans.aljazeera.net/news/balkan/2017/10/31/srbija-pocinje-unutrasnji-dijalog-o-kosovu>

¹⁴⁹ Marinković, M., Petronić, V., & Simonović, S. (2022). Citizens in Politics. Pristina: KFOS.

¹⁵⁰ Serbian List: Rada Trajković Prevented from Deciding for the Entire Serbian People in Kosovo and Metohija. (November 17, 2022). Danas. Retrieved from: <https://www.danas.rs/vesti/politika/srpska-lista-rada-trajkov-ic-sprece-na-u-nameri-da-odlucuje-o-citavom-srpskom-narodu-na-kosovu-i-metohiji/>

Serbian List: Jakšić, Just Like Kurti, Always Ready to Attack Serbian List and President Vučić with Lies and Insults. (January 14, 2023). Kosovo Online. Retrieved from: <https://www.kosovo-online.com/vesti/politika/srpska-lista-jak-sic-kao-i-kurti-uvek-spreman-lazima-i-uvredama-da-napadne-srpsku>

Serbian List from Gračanica: We will continue to defend national interests as honorably as possible in the future. (August 17, 2017). Kossev. Retrieved from: <https://kossev.info/srpska-lista-iz-gracanice-nastavlja-mo-i-u-buducnosti-sto-casnije-da-branimo-nacionalne-interese/>

¹⁵¹ Marinković, M., Petronić, V., & Simonović, S. (2022). Citizens in Politics. Pristina: KFOS.

Several of these matters have been the subject of in-depth analyses in numerous studies. Take, for instance, the crucial issue concerning the return of displaced Serbs. International mechanisms monitoring this process have highlighted that, over two decades since the conclusion of the Kosovo conflict, and despite substantial international aid and targeted initiatives for Kosovo, a decreasing number of individuals are choosing to return.¹⁵² This declining trend is attributable to significant challenges confronting the returning community, including security threats, limited freedom of movement, and unlawful property confiscations.¹⁵³

The protection of property rights within the Serbian community is another pressing issue. This encompasses not only the private property of Serbs in Kosovo but also includes the ownership of the Serbian Orthodox Church and the assets of businesses registered outside the territory of Kosovo, including those owned by the Republic of Serbia. This is especially controversial due to Pristina's refusal to discuss it within the framework of dialogue with Belgrade. According to official estimates from the Kosovo Agency for Property Comparison and Verification, created based on the 2011 agreement on the return of cadastral records, over 12,000 property cases, mostly involving Serbs from Kosovo, remain unresolved¹⁵⁴. Unofficial estimates suggest as many as 40,000 cases in which Serbs are seeking the return of usurped property or compensation for space usage.¹⁵⁵ The Serbian community in Kosovo faces significant difficulties in asserting property rights, including institutional neglect and abuse of authority. Examples include non-compliance with court decisions on property return, forgery of cadastral and property documents, threats, and extortion by usurpers.

All of these observations highlight a chronic issue that the Serbian community in Kosovo continually faces: the inconsistent and selective application of legal norms by Kosovo's institutions. While this specific matter was not explored as an individual theme in this research, it repeatedly surfaced during the analysis, underscoring how such an approach by Kosovo's authorities generates a plethora of the issues examined in this study. Whether it pertains to the enforcement of the Language Use Law, safeguarding the assets of the Serbian Orthodox Church, or unilateral interpretations of agreements established within the Brussels process, the Kosovo Government exhibits an inconsistent and irresponsible approach towards the legal mechanisms designed to protect the rights of the Serbian community. Another facet of the problem lies in the fact that this range of rights is not considered final. Throughout the dialogue process between Pristina and Belgrade, there have been periodic emergence of topics or proposals that could potentially entirely redefine the socio-political context within which these rights are established. This was evident in the concept of territorial exchange, and to some extent, the proposed EU Plan for Kosovo bears similar implications. For instance, it reintroduces discussions about the autonomous authority of the Serbian community, almost a decade after the signing of the Agreement on the Establishment of the Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities (A/ZSO). While awaiting a resolution on the extent of autonomy for the Serbian community in Kosovo, it is imperative to engage in discussions and develop mechanisms for the consistent implementation of existing and future agreements, along with the valid legislative framework that safeguards the interests of minority communities. Currently, such determination seems to be lacking in the international community.

International representatives in Kosovo display a similar passivity when it comes to addressing democratic deficiencies within the Serbian community in Kosovo. Beyond

¹⁵² According to the OSCE report from 2019 on voluntary returns to Kosovo, there were a total of 28,111 returnees out of the 220,000 people who had left Kosovo. OSCE. (2019). Assessment of Voluntary Returns to Kosovo. Retrieved from: <https://www.osce.org/files/f/1/documents/e/c/d/440744.pdf>

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Marković, I. & Surlić, S. (2021). Property Rights in Kosovo within the Framework of Comprehensive Normalization of Relations between Belgrade and Pristina. Belgrade: National Convention on the European Union. Retrieved from link

¹⁵⁵ Serbs in Kosovo struggle to reclaim their usurped property. (November 18, 2020). Gračanica online. Retrieved from: <https://gracanicaonline.info/2020/11/18/srbi-na-kosovu-tesko-do-svoje-a-uzurpirane-imovine/>

mere declarative condemnations or principled statements, there exists little concrete pressure exerted on the primary political actors within the Serbian community to fulfill their roles in accordance with universally accepted principles of a democratic society. Furthermore, there is limited encouragement for fostering internal pluralism of ideas and narratives. Many of the issues addressed in this study, including corruption, lack of transparency in public office, and partisan employment, underscore the pressing need for stronger democratic practices and enhanced social responsibility within the Serbian community. Strengthening these aspects is considered one of the essential conditions for the continued presence of Serbs in Kosovo.

This study, therefore, illustrates that even today, 23 years after the conclusion of the conflict in Kosovo, the Serbian community continues to grapple with numerous problems and pressures. These issues have become so extensive and intense that they now pose existential risks, pushing the Serbian community closer to a point where the hope for a sustainable life in Kosovo is in permanent jeopardy. This is exacerbated by the accelerating departure of its most vibrant members: the young and the educated. Awareness of this predicament is growing within the community itself, causing its attention to shift away from dominant political discourse to fundamental life concerns like employment, education, and the quality of services. The paramount concern is that the ongoing political process between Belgrade and Pristina must yield solutions aligned with the genuine needs of the Serbian community rather than serving the interests of political elites who negotiate on its behalf. This study aims to ambitiously contribute to the identification of these needs. Its primary objective is not to prescribe solutions but to underscore these authentic needs and provoke a broader and open societal discourse on issues critically important for the vitality of the Serbian community in Kosovo.



5. Conclusions and recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

What is the Serbian national interest in Kosovo?

The Serbian national interest remains elusive. It constitutes a dynamic concept rooted in the historical endeavors of the Serbian population to ensure their ethnic presence in Kosovo. However, this interest is currently expressed more as an acceptable behavioral model rather than a clearly defined political ideology. This distinct national, cultural, and identity-related bond hasn't been concretely incorporated into a strategic framework for political action. Instead, it finds expression through diverse political agendas without a cohesive consensus on the nature of the interest and the methods to attain it.

The concepts of national interest for Serbs and Albanians are mutually exclusive. They are rooted in the aspiration for socio-political dominance of one ethnic group over the other. Neither of these concepts accommodates the notion of coexistence except through the subordination of the "other side." This historical foundation is precisely what has perpetuated the prolonged ethnic conflict between Serbs and Albanians.

The highest cost is borne by the Serbs in Kosovo today. As a result of historical conflictual relations, the remaining Serbian community in Kosovo lives under difficult conditions, treated as a "foreign entity" by the Albanian majority, lacking convincing and consistent policies from Pristina that would ensure the full institutional implementation of guaranteed rights and freedoms. The support from Belgrade, although still of existential importance for the perseverance of the Serbian community, is increasingly burdened by restrictions and manifestations of a "partisan approach" that prioritizes narrow party interests over the broader community ones.

Serbs are leaving Kosovo. In such circumstances, worn down by continuous pressures, security threats, and a lack of development opportunities, the Serbian community is increasingly opting to depart from Kosovo. This trend is particularly evident among the most vibrant demographic segment, the youth, who increasingly perceive leaving Kosovo as a societal norm, an anticipated outcome, and a prerequisite for social advancement. According to official data, the number of students in elementary and high schools within Serbian communities in Kosovo has dropped by 40% over the last decade (from 25,000 to 15,000 students). A case study conducted as part of this research indicates that 60% of the 2020 graduating class of the Gymnasium in Mitrovica left Kosovo, primarily seeking better educational prospects.

Serbs in Kosovo do have an answer to what constitutes their national interest. The study reveals a clear awareness within the Serbian community about the impending demographic displacement. Interviews with over 30 prominent community leaders from various professions indicate that the prevailing sentiment in defining national interests ties this concept to the perseverance of Serbs in Kosovo or, more precisely, **the creation of a social and political environment that fosters dignified and productive lives for Serbs in Kosovo.** We tested this thesis across the broader community through surveys, and the results demonstrated that as many as 97% of surveyed legal-age citizens within the Serbian community are in agreement. The responses also provide suggestions on how to achieve this. The Serbian community south of the Ibar River believes that sustaining the status quo is feasible (58.8%), while respondents from northern Kosovo, for the most part (46.2%), endorsed the option of dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina to find compromises.

The Serbian community in Kosovo fears change. Within this community, there is a strong belief that the previous solutions achieved in the process of normalizing relations between Belgrade and Pristina have been to the detriment of Serbs in Kosovo. The solutions, which were intended to provide better living conditions, such as the establishment of the Community of Serbian Municipalities, have remained unimplemented. This fear is particularly pronounced in the Serbian community south of the Ibar River, where the majority sees the desired outcome of the Kosovo issue as maintaining the current state (almost 60% in favor of the status quo) until there are changes in international relations that would improve Serbia's position in negotiations. Conversely, in the Serbian community in northern Kosovo, the fear of change translates into a desire to return to the constitutional framework of the Republic of Serbia (64% in favor of restoring the status of Kosovo as an Autonomous Province according to the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia and UN Resolution 1244). This result shows that the majority of residents in this part of Kosovo still hold the aspiration for a solution involving territorial exchange and the reintegration of northern Kosovo into the constitutional framework of Serbia.

The EU Plan for Kosovo does not enjoy substantial support among the Serbian community in Kosovo. Approximately 20% of the survey participants opted for the option that encompassed the familiar premises of the Franco-German plan for Kosovo, commonly referred to as the EU Plan for Kosovo. Somewhat greater support was identified within Serbian communities situated south of the Ibar River, where 25.1% of respondents endorsed the plan, while in the northern regions, the level of support stood at around 15%.

Confidence in "Western actors" among the Serbian community is growing. The attitudes of the Serbian community towards the actors involved in the normalization process fall within the expected range, except for a noticeable increase in trust towards Western allies. Specifically, 25% of respondents from northern Kosovo believe that their interests are best preserved through cooperation with the EU and 24.3% with the US. This represents a significant increase compared to previous research findings (EU: 9.8% and US: 1.7%).

Serbs in Kosovo feel secure to the extent that they are isolated and shielded from the influences of Pristina's policies. Survey findings highlight that a total of 84% of participants believe that Pristina's policies are detrimental to their interests. Additionally, 77.1% of the Serbian respondents perceive the solution to the Kosovo issue either through reintegration into Serbia's constitutional framework or by maintaining that perspective in the long term via upholding the status quo. These options both exclude the executive competencies of Pristina over the Serbian community. Such a notable lack of trust presents a significant challenge for shaping solutions within the normalization process, as it necessitates a more responsible approach from Pristina toward the Serbian community, alongside the creation of mechanisms to ensure such trust.

The identity of Serbs in Kosovo is perceived to be in jeopardy. According to the survey, a majority of participants prioritize Pristina's responsibility to protect cultural heritage (60%) and to validate the ties between the Serbian community and Serbia (59.8%). These aspects are closely associated with the Serbian community's sense of identity, revealing a deeply entrenched feeling of being threatened. Interestingly, these responses received notably higher scores compared to the question regarding the establishment of the Association of Serbian Municipalities (44.3%).

Perceptions among Serbs in Kosovo regarding Belgrade's policy towards their interests are mixed. The survey results indicate that only a small percentage of respondents have firm position on this issue. Up to 17% believe that Belgrade's policy towards Serbs in Kosovo is entirely correct, while 22% view it as completely wrong. The majority of participants (60.2%) do not hold a definitive opinion, acknowledging both positive and negative aspects in Belgrade's approach.

Kosovo Serbs do not demand the impossible from Belgrade. When asked, "What do you understand by responsible policy from Belgrade?" respondents prioritize basic life concerns. They emphasize the need for increased investment in economic development and the eradication of corruption (65%), as well as improvements in education and the healthcare system (54.9%). These are areas in which Belgrade either holds exclusive responsibility or wields practical influence. Notably, one of the provided options within the same question was the option of returning the status of Autonomous Province of Kosovo, which was chosen by just over 30% of respondents.

These findings have significantly shaped the overarching conclusion of this research, highlighting that Kosovo Serbs view their national interest **as establishing the prerequisites for their continued existence within Kosovo. According to their viewpoint, this doesn't exclusively revolve around the issue of status, but rather emphasizes the need for prudent policies from both Belgrade and Pristina to address this challenge.**

What are the key factors for the perseverance of the Serbian community in Kosovo?

Autonomy

The foundation of the framework for the autonomy of Serbs in Kosovo is already established. The Serbian community in Kosovo indeed needs a governance structure that addresses their specific needs, often disregarded by Pristina, while also formalizing institutional connections with the Republic of Serbia. Key aspects of this autonomy are already in existence (including healthcare, education, social services), or they have been legally defined (such as the double-majority system and proportional participation in governance). The current challenge lies in integrating these elements into the institutional framework through collaborative negotiation-based approaches.

Divergent Perspectives on the Autonomy Framework. Within the Serbian community in Kosovo, there exist two distinct viewpoints regarding the potential shape of an autonomous framework. The first approach, often referred to as **the model of asymmetric autonomy**, draws inspiration from established European practices in managing the autonomous rights of minority groups. Under this paradigm, autonomy would be confined to the four municipalities in northern Kosovo, empowering them to oversee vital sectors such as education, healthcare, social services, and cultural institutions integrated from other parts of the Serbian community in Kosovo. The second model takes a different stance, suggesting that the current European norms of non-territorial autonomies serve merely as guiding principles rather than an exact blueprint for addressing the unique socio-political context of the Serbian community in Kosovo. According to this perspective, **solutions built upon these principles should be applied uniformly** across all ten municipalities with a Serbian majority.

Institutions are the Key. Despite the differing perspectives on the form of the autonomous framework for the Serbian community, the essence remains consistent. Both models, despite their variations, consider discretionary powers granted to a future body in the fields of healthcare, education, social services, and culture as pivotal components of substantive autonomy. This is a critical prerequisite for the preservation of the Serbian presence in Kosovo, a sentiment corroborated by nearly 95% of the participants in this study.

Security

Ensuring the security of the Serbian community holds paramount importance for their continued existence on Kosovo. This encompasses not only physical safety but also the broader social environment that allows the community to thrive, interact, educate, preserve its heritage, and uphold its identity. This sentiment resonates strongly among the participants of this study, with a staggering 97% echoing this concern, particularly those living south of the Ibar River, where vulnerabilities to ethnic tensions are more pronounced.

The politics as primary threats to security. While the statistics may indicate a decrease in ethnically driven incidents, the security landscape for the Serbian community in Kosovo is far from stable. The prevailing risks stem largely from the realm of politics, which often inflame tensions on the ground. Curiously, the process of normalizing relations between Pristina and Belgrade, initially intended to promote stability, has emerged as a significant contributor to ethnic tensions. This calls for a more nimble and assertive approach from the international community in its role as mediator.

Resolving political crises with political means. The current paramount security concern, managing the crisis in northern Kosovo, demands political, pragmatic, ad hoc normative solutions for Serb reintegration into Kosovo institutions. In the medium term, it becomes imperative to establish inclusive institutional remedies that ensure propor-

rtional participation of Kosovo Serbs in law enforcement entities, including leadership roles. Looking further ahead, the stability and security of the Serbian community in Kosovo largely hinge on achieving a normalization agreement between Pristina and Belgrade, which would lay the foundation for reconciliation and enduring peace on the Kosovo landscape. The recognition of the imperative for reconciliation among Kosovo's communities is unmistakably evident within the Serbian community, as borne out by the study, with an overwhelming 86.5% of respondents expressing their conviction in the significance of reconciliation.

Economy

The Public Sector as a Demographic Policy. The economic stability of the Serbian community in Kosovo is currently one of its foremost challenges. Strengthening the public sector as a primary strategy for anchoring the Serbian community to Kosovo has afforded economic security to a significant portion of the population. However, this approach has also yielded negative consequences by fostering socio-economic patterns that systematically neglect the development of the private sector. Overreliance on the public sector in the long run is poised to generate substantial adverse effects on the economic vitality and sustainability of the Serbian community.

Unfavorable Conditions for Growth. The private sector within the Serbian community has evolved in an unfavorable environment, burdened by persistent political and security instabilities, a scarcity of educated workforce, hindered access to incentive programs and fresh capital, and more. These constraining factors have shaped the structure of the private sector, characterized by microenterprises with local market orientation. These businesses are primarily focused on delivering services within restricted micro-markets, with limited prospects for substantial growth.

The private sector doesn't necessarily require more money, but rather its responsible distribution. Preconditions for the growth and strengthening of the production sector exist, but they are underutilized, mainly due to the lack of a strategic developmental approach, as well as pervasive manipulative actions in the allocation of funds intended for private sector development. Although official data point to a constant increase in Belgrade's investments in the economic development of the Serbian community, the effects on the ground remain unseen. The reason for this is the high level of corruption, clientelism, and misuse within the fund distribution system, which aims to satisfy narrow party interests instead of the community's economic well-being.

Pristina continues to overlook the needs and rights of the Serbian population. The situation doesn't improve when considering the access to support programs administered by the Kosovo government. In addition to corruption, economic entities within the Serbian community face administrative, linguistic, and legal barriers. One of the most noteworthy constraints is the passive stance taken by the Kosovo government regarding the implementation of affirmative measures to ensure the proportional involvement of minority communities in funds, public initiatives, and resources. This recurring scenario highlights the consistent pattern of selectively and arbitrarily applying existing legal standards.

Education

The education system in the Serbian community holds a strong political dimension. While education inherently carries societal value, within the current circumstances of high political influence across all aspects of social life, it gains an additional political dimension. It is perceived as one of the main pillars of the perseverance of

the Serbian community in Kosovo. In such conditions, the educational system inevitably becomes susceptible to external negative influences that tangibly impact the quality of education and the effectiveness of the educational system. Thus, this study identifies three main issues burdening the educational system in the Serbian community in Kosovo: inadequate teaching infrastructure, corruption, and the general deterioration of the educational system.

Decreasing quality of education is one of the primary motivations for leaving Kosovo. Stemming from the chronic issues within the educational system of the Serbian community in Kosovo since the aftermath of the 1999 war, the lack of adequate infrastructure for an effective teaching process stands out as a prominent concern. This problem not only undermines the right to education for young individuals within the Serbian community but also translates into below-average student achievements over time due to insufficient conditions for a high-quality teaching process. Corruption within the educational system, also identified as a crucial problem, violates meritocratic social principles and demotivates young people from being part of the educational system or acquiring societal recognition through academic achievements. Consequently, this undermines the very fabric and societal function of the educational system. Another indicator of the poor state of education is the general devaluation of knowledge, where knowledge is socially perceived as personal human capital rather than an inherent value in itself.

The cumulative effect of these shortcomings has a significant impact on the demographic prospects of the Serbian community in Kosovo, as a noticeable trend of increasing numbers of young people leaving Kosovo in search of better education has already emerged. All of this points to the necessity for systemic reforms that the Republic of Serbia should undertake to preserve the integrity and dignity of the educational system. Furthermore, it underscores the necessity for actions from Pristina that would legitimize educational institutions within the Serbian community in Kosovo.

Protection of cultural heritage and the status of the Serbian Orthodox Church

Cultural heritage and the Serbian Orthodox Church are integral components of the identity of the Serbian community in Kosovo. Effectively safeguarding them is a key prerequisite for fostering positive ethnic relations in Kosovo. In areas located south of the Ibar River, where ethnic interactions are more pronounced, the Serbian Orthodox Church and its monasteries serve as some of the most significant cohesive elements within the community. Their societal role extends beyond religious boundaries, encompassing matters of security, social cohesion, and the community's economic survival. These points are further substantiated by research findings, indicating that 84.9% of the Serbian population residing south of the Ibar River consider this issue to be of paramount importance for the continued presence of Serbs in Kosovo. This percentage is twice as high as that of their fellow countrymen in the northern part (41%).

Protection of cultural heritage necessitates normative enhancements. The existing normative model, anchored in the provisions of the Ahtisaari Plan for Kosovo, exhibits evident shortcomings in cultivating efficient frameworks to safeguard cultural heritage and the status of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Foremost among these issues are biased interpretations and the selective enforcement of current legal remedies, which effectively paralyze the comprehensive framework of special

of special protection. Additionally, a structural challenge in its application stems from the absence of a unified, legally binding document that would comprehensively regulate all rights and obligations of the Serbian Orthodox Church within the Kosovo territory. Moreover, the lack of an effective international mechanism for implementing the distinctive status of Serbian cultural and religious heritage further compounds these challenges. In the forthcoming process of defining solutions for the normalization of relations between Serbia and Kosovo, particular attention to the enhancement of the existing model is imperative.

Political Representation of the Serbian Community

Community rights as an obstacle. The legal framework regulating the participation of Serbs in governance in Kosovo is perceived by the Albanian majority as a hindrance to achieving their political, and even national goals, rather than a progressive mechanism of participatory (consociational) democracy. Through this approach, Pristina endangers the very purpose of Serbs' participation in Kosovo's institutions.

Participation in Governance as the option with no alternative The process of destigmatizing the engagement of the Serbian community in the political life of Kosovo remains incomplete, despite the support from Belgrade since 2012 for Serbian involvement in governance and electoral processes within Kosovo's constitutional and legal framework. Voices that brand such political involvement as a betrayal of national interests still hold significant influence within the Serbian community. However, research indicates that a strong awareness exists within the Serbian community in Kosovo regarding the necessity of participating in the exercise of power on Kosovo soil. Over two-thirds of the respondents (72.2%) view Serbian engagement in Kosovo's institutions as being in the best interest of the Serbian community.

The heterogeneity of interests within the Serbian community in Kosovo is inadequately reflected at the political level. The political engagement of the Serbian community is marked by structural democratic shortcomings that hinder the accurate political representation of the diversity of interests and priorities existing within the community. Those include a political representation monopoly established by the Srpska List with the support of Belgrade, a partisan approach to the Kosovo issue due to the absence of a national strategic platform for the Kosovo question, systematic suppression of pluralism and freedom of expression within the Serbian community, and finally, personnel and programmatic favoritism towards northern Kosovo in contrast to other Serbian areas. As a consequence of these patterns, a significant portion of the Serbian community believes that their interests are not credibly represented by elected political representatives, or even by Belgrade in the dialogue regarding the normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina.

In the overarching conclusion of this study, it becomes evident that the Serbian community in Kosovo confronts a plethora of challenges spanning nearly all areas critical to their rights and quality of life. Throughout the study, a recurring pattern emerges, identifying two specific and ubiquitous drivers behind the community's issues and shortcomings. **The first revolves around the selective application and arbitrary interpretation of legal norms** designed to safeguard the rights and interests of the Serbian community, as orchestrated by the authorities in Pristina. The second pattern revolves **around political manipulations within the governing framework of the Serbian community**, marked by corruption, nepotism, the suppression of political pluralism, and freedom of expression, along with a myriad of other manifestations.

5.2 Recommendations

Autonomy

Srpska zajednica na Kosovu mora imati snažan, sadržajan, međunarodno The Serbian community in Kosovo must have a robust and internationally guaranteed autonomous framework that genuinely enables the community to make independent decisions on critical life matters, shielded from the will of the majority. This is referred to as Functional Self-Governance in the study. This right is not only derived from the imperative of compromise in the negotiation process but also from the long-standing patterns of arbitrary treatment of the community's rights by authorities in Pristina and the decades-long neglect of its legitimate interests. When viewed in this manner, the question of autonomy for Serbs in Kosovo becomes a legitimate democratic demand that will facilitate coexistence between Serbs and Albanians, rather than a disruptive event that reshapes ethnic relations in Kosovo and potentially leads to future conflicts.

The imperative, therefore, is to find a solution tailored to the essential needs of the community as a precondition for its perseverance in Kosovo. To achieve this, the future framework of autonomous powers for the Serbian community must:

- Expand the basic competencies, rooted in the principle of territorial autonomy (ten municipalities with a Serbian majority), by extending autonomous powers based on ethnic affiliation to encompass the Serbian community in municipalities where they do not constitute a majority.
- Incorporate a well-defined and unhindered right to financial support from Serbia in the execution of its responsibilities.
- Include the authority to govern educational, healthcare, social, cultural, and other institutions within the Serbian community in Kosovo that are currently operating within the administrative system of the Republic of Serbia.
- Possesses the authority to enact sub-legislative acts that regulate the functioning of these institutions, as well as inspection bodies responsible for overseeing their compliance.
- Coordinates the operations of primary, secondary, and tertiary healthcare institutions, formulates organizational policies, and manages their budgets.
- Manages a public healthcare fund, collects contributions from beneficiaries within the Serbian community, and guarantees their healthcare system's synchronization with the Republic Health Insurance Fund in Belgrade.
- Facilitates dual accreditation (Serbia-Kosovo) for educational institutions within the Serbian community.
- Has discretionary power to define the minimum number of students required to establish a class, deviating from the standards of both systems, to ensure the operation of Serbian-language schools in rural areas.
- Holds the authority to establish, regulate, and coordinate the activities of cultural institutions such as museums, theaters, libraries, media outlets, and more.

- Establishes sports associations with dual accreditation in Kosovo and Serbia, enabling their membership in sports associations and participation in leagues of their choice.
- Should be established through an agreement that includes clear international guarantees and a system of protective measures, including periodic assessments of its implementation consistency.
- Establishes sub-committees to oversee the implementation of the agreement on the autonomous framework for the Serbian community within the Joint Committee for Monitoring the implementation of the normalization process between Belgrade and Pristina (Point 11).

This list does not exhaust all the powers that the future body should have but provides insight into the essential elements of the framework for functional self-governance in the fundamental life matters of the Serbian community in Kosovo. This quality can only be achieved if the process of establishing an autonomous framework is based on the following principles:

- Solutions must not be limited by the existing legislative frameworks of Serbia and Kosovo but should anticipate their amendments to establish and guarantee a model of functional self-governance for the Serbian community.
- Similarly, the existing European experiences referenced in Article 7 of the agreement on the Path to the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia must serve as a source of inspiration for solutions adapted to the genuine needs of the Serbian community in Kosovo, rather than serving as a limiting framework. This principle acknowledges that effective solutions must consider local socio-political specificities.
- Finally, the future autonomous framework should legitimize the institutional connections between Serbs in Kosovo and Serbia. While these organic connections in Pristina are referred to as instrumentalization, they are, in a significant part, legalized by positive legal regulations and fundamental proposals within the text of the normalization agreement.

Economy

Recommendations related to the economic development of the Serbian community aim to create a conducive environment for the growth of private entrepreneurship, as according to the study's findings, this sector is the only one with growth potential. To achieve this, the following steps are necessary:

- Create a strategic plan for the economic development of the Serbian community in Kosovo, serving as the foundation for the "special EU package of investments and financial support" outlined in Article 9 of the agreement on the Path to the normalization of relations between Kosovo and Serbia.
- The strategic plan, to be developed by the EU in collaboration with Belgrade and Pristina, must take into account local priorities and specific developmental advantages at the local level (such as tourism, spa facilities, organic food production, etc.) to ensure sustainable outcomes.
- Based on the strategic plan for economic development, the Republic of Serbia should establish a Development Fund targeting young individuals, newlywed couples, and socially vulnerable families.
- All stakeholders must pay special attention to the element of economic sustainability in the process of returning displaced individuals to Kosovo to make it viable and enduring.

- The Republic of Serbia, based on the model of subsidies for foreign investors in Serbia, should develop measures that subsidize domestic companies for expanding their operations in Kosovo and employing people from the Serbian community. This package of measures should include subsidies of €10,000 for every job created in Kosovo, as well as tax incentives for companies participating in this program.
- Establishment of centralized Service to assist entrepreneurs from the Serbian community in integrating into the Kosovo market (accreditation, networking, training, etc.), including technical support in competitions for development funds from Pristina, Belgrade, and international donor agencies, or applications for credit/loans and fresh capital.
- The Government of Kosovo should introduce affirmative quotas in the allocation of funds for strengthening the private sector to ensure that a proportional share of resources is reserved for enterprises from non-majority communities in Kosovo.
- An independent assessment of the fulfillment of the 10% quota for positions in public institutions for members of non-majority communities in Kosovo, as prescribed by the Law on Civil Service of Kosovo according to the constitutional principle of fair representation. This assessment should also encompass secondary legislative acts that prescribe the Kosovo Government's affirmative approach to the employment of non-majority community members, known as Active Recruitment Measures (ARM).
- Reactivate the functioning of the Development Fund as an important instrument for providing development funds for the Serbian community and redefine its purpose by expanding the use of funds to include the Serbian community south of the Ibar River.
- Civil society organizations from the Serbian community should create programs that address the rights of workers in the private sector.
- Utilize the advantages of having an academic center like the University of Mitrovica and develop economic development and innovative programs (such as the IT sector, agriculture, etc.) through partnerships with the private sector.
- To diversify the funding sources for the private sector within the Serbian community, civil society, either independently or in partnership with local authorities, should establish online crowdfunding platforms. These platforms would serve to incentivize investments, be they financial or philanthropic, from the diaspora.

Protection of Cultural Heritage and the status of the Serbian Orthodox Church

Given the significant role of cultural heritage and the Serbian Orthodox Church in the identity of the Serbian community, these aspects should be given special attention during the forthcoming negotiations regarding the identification of self-governance authorities for the Serbian community in Kosovo. Discussions and consultations must actively involve relevant representatives from the Serbian Orthodox Church.

A comprehensive normalization agreement should address the following key aspects:

- To expand the existing list of sites to enjoy special international protection with a universally accepted categorization of various structures and locations. This would involve the likely addition to the list of 44 sites mentioned in the Ahtisaari Plan.

- To resolve current property disputes and jurisdictional conflicts (such as VisokiDečani Monastery, Christ the Savior Cathedral in Pristina, Holy Archangels Monastery near Prizren, Novo Brdo, etc.), which would entail Pristina's obligation to implement all court decisions confirming the property rights of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC).
- To assure full implementation of the property restitution plan for the SPC following the provisions and spirit of the Ahtisaari Proposal, including a ban on further privatization of confiscated, nationalized, or expropriated property claimed by the Serbian Orthodox Church.
- To explore the applicability of principles of extraterritoriality based on existing solutions in European practice as the measure that strengthens the protection mechanism for the cultural and religious heritage of the Serbian community in Kosovo.
- Defining the executive powers of the Implementation and Monitoring Council (IMC) with additional legal mechanisms ensuring the enforcement of decisions by this body without arbitrary interference from Pristina.
- To collaborate with the SPC to protect its property rights, free movement, economic, customs, and other provisions, as well as the canonical links of the Eparchy of Raška-Prizren with the Serbian Orthodox Church, which has its centuries-old seat in Peć.

Security

Establishing full security for the Serbian community requires a responsible approach that addresses structural issues to mitigate ethnic tensions and establish enduring political solutions. The process of normalizing relations between Kosovo and Serbia has exacerbated ethnic and political tensions. Consequently, achieving a comprehensive agreement grounded in compromise becomes an indispensable opportunity to signify the resolution of political conflicts and the resultant instability within the community. This process could serve as the cornerstone for building a stable foundation for Kosovo's Serbian community, affording them a greater sense of security and improved prospects for planning their future. To attain this, several prerequisites need to be fulfilled.

- A crucial precondition for the full commitment of negotiating parties to future normalization agreements is to identify a political solution to the current crisis in the north. This solution entails the organization of new local elections in northern Kosovo, with substantial participation from Kosovo Serbs and under the firm guarantees of the international community regarding the establishment of the Association/Community of Serb-majority Municipalities or an autonomous framework for the Serbian community.
- In the same vein, through a political solution, ensure the return of Kosovo Serbs to the judicial institutions.
- Expedite the normalization of the Kosovo Police's operations in northern Kosovo within the shortest timeframe. Achieve this through a political resolution in the dialogue process, which should include a defined form of amnesty for a significant portion of Kosovo Police officers who departed from their positions in 2022.
- Over the long term, guarantee the genuine integration of Kosovo Serbs into police structures. By "genuine," we mean integration that surpasses mere statistical quotas for police officers from the Serbian community. It should also involve their inclusion in command hierarchies based on a fair career advancement system.
- Heighten civilian oversight of the activities of special forces in northern Kosovo until a consensus is reached on their withdrawal or their engagement in collaboration with local authorities.

- Secure the legal and property rights of non-majority communities in Kosovo by diligently applying the legal framework and activating international monitoring mechanisms.
- Foster confidence-building measures among communities, encompassing the participation of all relevant social stakeholders.

Education

The educational system in the Serbian community in Kosovo is based on the curriculum provided by the Ministry of Education, Science, and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia. As such, the role of the Republic of Serbia is pivotal in enhancing the quality of education in Kosovo's Serbian communities and revitalizing the teaching profession's reputation. Nevertheless, it's important to note that Pristina also plays a role in the education system, and some of its actions have direct adverse effects on the Kosovo Serb education system.

Taking these factors into account, as the initial steps to elevate the quality of education, the following actions should be prioritized:

- Strengthening the infrastructure of the education system in the Serbian community through targeted and transparent investments from the Republic of Serbia, as well as reversing the decision of the Mayor of North Mitrovica that prohibits the construction of the University Center, a project that would significantly expand the spatial capacities of the University in Mitrovica.
- Enhancing the quality of teaching personnel across all levels of the education system in the Serbian community through the implementation of merit-based hiring practices and their active involvement in professional development programs.
- Introduce the term limits for school principles, in line with effective regional models (like Montenegro's restriction to two terms), to minimize opportunities for abuse of power and corrupt behavior.
- Introducing new educational programs at the University of Mitrovica and revising curricula to align with labor market demands and European educational standards, reducing the outflow of young talent from Kosovo.
- Ensuring full adherence to the Brussels and Berlin Agreements, facilitating the mutual recognition of diplomas and professional qualifications. Complying with these agreements is essential for enhancing employment prospects, career development, recognition, and the integration of minority community members within Kosovar society.

Political system in the Serbian Community in Kosovo

The fundamental issue in the political activities of the Serbian community in Kosovo, as well as in the Republic of Serbia, is the lack of a strategic approach. This stems from the absence of societal consensus on national interests regarding Kosovo. The chances of achieving such progress in political awareness soon are minimal. Given this, the main recommendation of this report is to redirect the unified political action of all socio-political actors towards 'human policies, i.e. the preservation of human resources in the Serbian community in Kosovo. One precondition for achieving this is the redefinition of political practices, as well as the conception of politics itself, both within the Serbian community in Kosovo and in the context of the relationship between Serbs from Kosovo and Serbia. This can be accomplished in the following ways:

- Actively engage in the political life of Kosovo and utilize all existing mechanisms to safeguard against the majority's dictates. There is no alternative to this approach, and the recent crisis in the north fundamentally demonstrated the risks of non-institutional action.
- Initiate an open social dialogue within the Serbian community to identify solutions and specific arrangements for self-governance, as outlined in Article 7 of the Agreement on the Path for Normalization of Relations between Kosovo and Serbia.
- By systematic approach strengthens socio-political pluralism and ensures the representative character of political leadership so that the neglected interests of the community south of the Ibar River receive clear and effective political articulation.
- Target the same changes, meaning the representation of neglected interests within the community, by strengthening independent social actors such as media, civil society organizations, and other forms of citizen-led association aspiring for the protection of personal and public interests.
- Encourage grassroots activism as a form of pressure for accountable governance at the local community level, serving as a foundation for participatory democracy.
- Enhance the professionalism of the political sphere by establishing a fund dedicated to awarding scholarships to young leaders from the Serbian community. Through this initiative, 10 students from the Serbian community in Kosovo would receive scholarships annually, enabling them to pursue studies either at the Faculty of Political Sciences in Belgrade or in international academic programs. This fund should also encompass advanced academic modules focused on improving competence in public administration. Following program completion, students would be eligible for employment within institutions operating within the Serbian community in Kosovo.

Corruption

The study did not specifically delve into various forms of unethical and illegal practices in governance and the distribution of public funds, such as corruption, nepotism, clientelism, and the like. However, these manifestations of such socio-political patterns were alluded to in each of the discussed areas. Whether it was corruption within economic aid programs, political affiliation used as a criterion for employment, the education system's treatment as political spoils, and many more, these patterns emerged as significant factors contributing to a democratic deficit within the Serbian community. They are also one of the key drivers for the youth's emigration from Kosovo. This highlights that addressing internal dynamics within the Serbian community is as crucial as managing relations with the Albanian population. To mitigate these challenges, systemic measures are required, bolstering institutional oversight, independent judiciaries, and the like. The issue lies in the fact that those responsible for reinforcing institutional control are sometimes the very entities benefiting from these inadequacies. Hence, a substantial part of the recommendations aims to empower independent civil society actors to combat these ubiquitous corrupt practices, potentially fostering the eradication of these issues. This can be achieved through:

- Strengthen/create a whistleblowing system for corrupt practices, introducing special protections for whistleblowers and promoting general social solidarity in cases of repression against individuals or organizations exposing corrupt activities.
- Support prominent regional anti-corruption watchdog organizations (such as CINS and KRIK) to expand their programs and activities to the Serbian community in Kosovo.
- Enhance investigative journalism within the Serbian community in Kosovo.

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Another recurring issue that significantly impacts the Serbian community across various aspects of this research is the irresponsible and selective application of the legal framework designed to protect community rights by the authorities in Pristina. This issue isn't confined to the incumbent government; it has been a consistent pattern seen throughout different administrations in Kosovo. The persistence of such an approach strongly suggests that the denial of rights to the Serbian community is a bipartisan consensus among Kosovo Albanian political representatives. Despite continuous alerts from various Serbian community stakeholders and international monitoring mechanisms, the Kosovo government's stance toward the Serbian community remains unaltered. Consequently, the international community must reassess its previous approach and establish a robust monitoring mechanism to ensure the implementation of the comprehensive agreement and the legislative framework safeguarding the rights of minority communities. This mechanism should include specific punitive measures against those who violate, neglect, or manipulate it. This serves as the concluding recommendation of this report.



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